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Tom Uren MP Federal Labor Spokesman on Urban Affairs and the Environment Delivering the 1972 Walter Burley Griffin Memorial Lecture at the Becker Hall of the Australian Academy of Science Building.

Abstract:

Tom Uren argues that the heritage of 23 years of Liberal rule has led to different policies condemning each other, and the migration and population policies have suffered by the failure to implement decentralisation policies. Uren argues that the symptoms of urban decay reflected in transportation chaos or air and water pollution mark the underlying problem of population growth. He suggests that the optimal size of an urban area is 500,000 people and raises questions of ecology, of justice and of the welfare for communities living in cities.

Everywhere in the Western world there is a wave of nostalgia for yesteryear – for the late 40s or particularly the early 50s. For some reason many people seem to think that this was the last time everything “worked” well, when optimism was the rule rather than the exception. Now nothing seems to go right any more. Actually, things weren’t so good then either, but for the middle class times were comparatively better. The middle class had more power and prestige in a less congested city. Much of that sense of loss is simply the result of urban growth.

In the late 40s, Sydney and Melbourne still “worked” as cities, the mass transit system worked, fairly clean air, uncrowded and clean beaches, no drugs, less violence and crime and ample employment. Sydney and Melbourne have gained something by doubling their population, but they have also lost a great deal. Although it is the middle class who complains the loudest, it is the less affluent, for although they may have more money in their pockets, are even worse off.

The decline in our cities and in our environment can be traced to many things, including the carrying out of policies which undermine each other. There is, for example, no integration of our population and decentralisation policies. Also at fault is the political overpowering of one group by another – the less affluent by the rich – together with ‘public’ impotence and apathy. Finally, the decline is due to the social irresponsibility of some professional people who, if their view of things had been larger, could have lessened the damage. The result has been the creation of urban systems increasingly unfit for human living on both physical and social grounds, and the waste in the use of natural resources. Even new planned cities, such as Canberra, are not without criticism on the same grounds. Canberra is a planned city as compared to Sydney, but is still not the real solution.

Tonight I hope I can stimulate you into thinking about the future. We must examine where we are wrong, ignorant, or selfish, and how we can redirect ourselves in the right way.

Rapid urban growth in Australia has been a phenomenon of the last 20 years. The tremendous costs of urban growth are now well known; not enough homes for those who need them most, high land prices, poor services of sewerage and public transport, poor educational, health and cultural facilities, long journeys to work and to recreation areas, overloaded and polluted water sheds and air sheds. The economic, environmental and social advantages of decentralisation and regional development are also well known. The problem in Australia has been the over concentration of a population which has been growing at almost 2% annually. The strain on our cities is due to the fact that the migration program in Australia was not accompanied by the implementing of the decentralisation plan of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, and the Federal Government's starving of the State, Local and semi-government authorities of adequate funds to provide services for the increased population. The result is chaos in our cities.

We in the ALP recognise the important role migrants have played in making Australia in many ways, a richer place to live in, especially culturally. Because we advocate a progressive decrease in the rate of immigration in the interest of all who now live here, the Liberal/Country Party are trying to suggest that the ALP is anti-migrant. We started the migration program and are proud of it. The Liberals who followed us in 1949 did not implement our regional development plans, and so forced migrants and the older Australians to live in the big cities because of lack of job opportunities whether they wanted to or not.

After 23 years the Federal Government has been forced to at least acknowledge some responsibility for the pattern of human settlement in Australia. I question whether their ad hoc policy of National Urban and Regional Development Authority is the answer to the problems of the Cities or Regional areas, as NURDA has no power in any way to deal with allocation of resources. They still do not accept the need for an integrated population policy.

Our natural annual increase in population during the last 23 years has been 1.1 per cent. Immigration has added another 0.8 per cent. As a result we have had an annual overall increase of 1.9 per cent over the period of the present government's administration. With a 1.1 per cent growth rate our population would be 17.3 million at the end of the century. With a growth rate of 1.9 per cent it would be 23 million by the end of the century – a difference of six million or almost the population of the entire country at the end of 1945.

The great percentage of our migrants have remained in our two major cities – Sydney and Melbourne. There have been no real employment opportunities created elsewhere in country areas. Since the Second World War the New

Towns Commission in the United Kingdom has been able to attract only one million people to its planned communities. If we can put one million people into our new cities in regional areas in Australia but the end of the century we will be making real progress. The population of the rural areas has decreased from 31 per cent of the national population in 1947 to 14 per cent today. We will have a great struggle to get one million people out of the metropolitan areas.

All those not living in regional areas will live in or near the ever-expanding metropolitan areas. If the population increases by 1.1 per cent annually until the year 2000 and we put one million people in new cities and regional areas we will have 3.3 million people left who will live in the existing large cities and system cities. If the population grows at its rate of 1.9 per cent per annum as at present, and we still put one million people into our new cities, we will have to put another *nine* million people into our expanded old cities. If, as the Prime Minister said, our population increases by nine million by the end of the century and we put one million people into our new cities and regional areas, we will have to put the other eight million into our existing cities. The difference between the first two projections I made, one being approximately three times the other, will have a very big impact on the planning of the old cities and the quality of life for the people in them. Still the Prime Minister merely says that the population "might grow to 22 million" by the year 2000, without recognising the impact on the old large Australian cities, and on the development of our new ones.

Human settlers are in a state of crisis in many parts of the world. The causes of the problems are varied but basic to all is growth. And it is interesting that even though most people recognise that the primary cause of urban chaos in Australia at least is too rapid growth, almost no person, politician, professional or citizen, has spoken out that the root cause if the problem must be attacked. The attack is upon the symptoms of urban decay and not the cause. Symptoms such as transport chaos, air and water pollution, the creation of thermal islands, greater violence and crime, are attacked separately. There is no move to reduce the massive population pressure which is behind it all. It is interesting to consider why? The planner, the sewage or transport engineer, the school builder, and so on, accept the growth as inevitable and carry on their work as if they had absolutely no control over this juggernaut. They do not see it as part of their job. The large cities will grow certainly, but there is a lot which can be done to slow them down and rationalise their planning. As I've said, Australia has the opportunity of choosing whether it will add from 3.3 to nine million population in the next 30 years to them. That is indeed a choice!

On a global scale, ecologists have estimated that the optimum populations of the earth is one thousand million and this is based on the reasonable use of the earth's resources at per capita level as in the western world. We passed 1000 million in 1850! We've not yet done our homework well enough to determine the optimum size of urban areas, but work so far being done in California suggests that this figure is about half a million. We are in a world where over population,

excessive resource consumption per capita in the Western world which is pushed on by an economic and advertising system which entices people to consume even more – together with pollution all threaten our very life support system.

We have built and even planned cities in ignorance of the flow of energy and resources in the natural environment. We have built cities not recognising that the entire resource system will break down if the common resources of land, water and air are used above the very strict limits of use imposed by nature. We have planned cities based on concepts of economic efficiency or pleasant vistas and not as places for people to live in. We have built cities without asking ourselves what the fundamental goals of a city should be, and have considered as an assumption the idea that a city is a concentration of services rather than a concentration of people. We have planned and built cities which have perpetuated divisions between people men from women, by long work journeys, and rich from poor. We have built cities which specifically conform to the ideals of a particular group. For example, in Canberra we are building a garden city based on middle class values.

We have built cities without thinking about the impact of that urbanisation on nearby resources. For example, the building of Melbourne in a South East direction has placed an intolerable burden in certain quarry sites, some of great beauty, such as Arthur's Seat.

We have built cities totally inappropriate to the Australian environment and Australia resources; cities which unnecessarily consume vast quantities of water and energy and which, as the recent petrol strike proved, are more dependent on supplies of petroleum than many other cities in the world. I could go on. Even our planned cities such as Canberra continue most of the same mistakes, although it is a most pleasant city to live in. Canberra's land tenure before January 1971 was also an outstanding example of what can be done to help young home builders, but even that has been destroyed.

It would seem as if we've done nothing right. We are now beginning to realise that we must use our natural resources better, to husband and conserve rather than to blindly exploit them for short term profit. We are now beginning to realise that in conserving flora and fauna from the ravages of mankind we are protecting human beings from ravages of mankind. We are now beginning to realise the consequences of an economic system extolling consumption, which makes people want things rather than think about whether they need them. We are now beginning to realise that almost all of our decisions are made to benefit an economic system as measured by that so-called index of progress, the GNP, rather than in the interests of that for which the whole thing is supposedly directed – the increased welfare of people, both now and in the future.

Old time socialists, are as trapped in ideology as are conservatives, they offer no real hope. However ideology must not get in the way of knowledge and wisdom,

and we will need a great deal of both to reverse the trend. Clearly we must begin to think anew, and be idealistic in our search for solutions. The political leaders must “dream aloud” and paint the future direction – they are answerable to the people and must involve the people in all plans. The technocrats and professional people must also realise the dream of working together in a common cause.

There are two things we must achieve. Because human beings are dependent on the system itself surviving, we must recognise the limits of the earth system, and design for humanity an optimum living environment within those limits. Secondly, we must work and plan for real social equality for all men and women. Both will only be achieved by a new kind of coalition of politicians, professional and ordinary people. On the first point, we must conserve resources and use them wisely. To do this we will have to look at the plundering of the earth’s resources. We must attack the system which convinces people to want more things they don’t really need and come up with a better index of ‘progress’ than the GNP. We must look at the very base of our life support system – energy. Primitive homo sapiens were very limited in their populations and could not diversify their culture very much. All their energy came from the sun via the food they ate and the wood they burned. The wood they burned was sun energy stored up during the preceding few years. To obtain their food they spent most of their day hunting and practicing agriculture – there was no time to develop their minds and pursue new endeavours. All that changed with the industrial revolution which was really an energy revolution. Human beings freed themselves from such a dependence on the sun. Tractors replaced horses, and allowed greater agricultural production. The new energy source which supplemented the supply were fossil fuels, coal, oil and natural gas, which like wood stores up the sun’s energy but over millions rather than tens of years. This extra energy enabled populations to explode because of more food production and of their ability to plough more difficult agricultural land. It freed many people to pursue non food producing activities. Our sophisticated urban systems are the results.

Energy flows in immense amounts through an urban system and is eventually released as heat. The heat release is such that in many urban areas, thermal islands (hot spots in a cooler sea) are changing the climate of the city itself. A key feature requirement is the design of minimal energy cities. The urban systems also use vast quantities of other resources, such as copper, chromium and other metals which are in very short supply, and for which there are no readily available substitutes, cement (which means more mined out limestone caves and mined out sand dunes near the city), and so on. The other side of this problem, disposal of wastes, solid and air borne, is creating immense problems.

The recycling of resources is now only commencing. The size of our cities, the huge concentration of people together with the large resources per capita used in building and servicing the modern Western city, is straining the environment to the limits.

However any attempts which we have made until now in planning new cities are still not the solution. Canberra is a good example. It is hard to conceive of a city which is more wasteful of land, water and energy than Canberra. Low density Canberra is more crippled by a petrol strike than many larger cities; the message for a petroleum depleted future should be clear. Vast amounts of water are used to try and support a semi-green oasis in a semi-arid climate. The city is very wasteful of land. Canberra has about 240 temperature inversions per year, is very dependent upon petroleum for heating and transport, is surrounded by hills, and despite lack of industry has air pollution problems now. Readings for carbon-monoxide on Northbourne Avenue rival the larger cities.

Yet Canberra is living proof that decentralisation can work in Australia – but it is no real blue print for what we must achieve. We can draw from Canberra's experience with its positive and its negative aspects in the years ahead.

Conservation also means that we look to preserving flora and fauna in sufficient amounts to enable their evolution to continue, and to preserve our historical buildings and other parts of our cultural identity.

Secondly, we must work to achieve equality. An equal society is not one which just redistributes income. It is doubtful whether present urbanisation trends are increasing equality. It is probably being decreased in our large urban areas, and Canberra, although better, is no ideal either. Society benefits the rich at the expense of the rest in so many ways. The provision of health and education, employment opportunities, services of sewage and transport, cultural facilities, recreation facilities are always best in the wealthier areas. If anything the gap is getting larger between the rich and the less affluent. When conflict arises it is usually the rich, because of their greater political muscle, who get their way. Expressways which get the motorists to work, alienate whole sections of the city and the social system where many of the less affluent people live. If a city plan exists at all it usually conforms to the ideals of the middle class. As Herbert Gans points out in his book *People and Plans* the entire evolution of the city usually amounts to a power struggle between different sectional interests in the city – and always it is the less affluent who lose. The entire design of Canberra conforms to a middle class 'garden city' ideal, and that is why the middle class transport system, the car, reigns supreme in Canberra – too bad for the people who cannot afford to own a car. In the old cities as population pressures drive costs of land and houses up, the poorer lose again and they have to move out to make way for the more affluent.

However, nothing is still done to treat the cause of the trouble, the growth of the city; rather, as always, the symptoms are treated – and those that need assistance lose again. Most professional people work for the establishment, - the firm or the government. The less affluent do not have any of the same professional skill behind them – political muscle, knowledge – and influence it is

no wonder they lose out so often. In the planned city of Canberra the transport system, and by that I mean, the roads and public transport, is geared for the journey to work. In this city the housewives, teenagers, the old and the poor are not considered. Many of the less affluent are priced out to Queanbeyan, housewives are isolated from each other in a suburban sprawl supposed necessary by the demands of the motor car and the garden city the wonderful facilities of the city are unavailable for children from families without cars.

Let us look to solutions. There are roles for governments, for citizens and for professionals. There are two quotations which were often used in the UN Human Environment Conference in Stockholm, although neither originated there.

- (1) "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."
- (2) "The solution is as complex as the problem."

The First Law of Ecology according to Barry Commoner in his book *The Closing Circle* is that 'everything is connected to everything else'. He means by this that in an ecosystem, all species are connected by an interlocked network of energy and nutrients. Human beings are constantly tampering with natural ecosystems in order to make them serve them better. They modify the land for agriculture, they build cities – both change the ecosystem and have far reaching effects throughout the ecosystem. Systems Ecology is now developing as a science which will enable us to come to grips with the consequences of this tampering and which will enable us to do it all wisely. The systems ecologist looks at the whole system, and not part of it. When 'everything is connected to everything else' it is the only way it can be done.

Sectors of the economy which are environmentally destructive must be only allowed to grow with the most thorough and comprehensive environment impact assessment and planning. This means that government will have to be more future oriented and that governments must be involved including State, Local and semi government authorities, not just the Federal Government. There can and will be disagreements on what the goals should be, this is what politics is all about, but once the priorities have been decided, it is the role of governments to attain these goals by thorough planning and an integrated approach.

In a democratic system, there must be also a great deal more citizen action. In the last few years, via the mass media, people have had an increasing exposure to the problems facing us; however, their chance to do anything about them has not changed. They are still expected to cast their vote every three years and leave the rest to the politicians and bureaucrats. The political structure will have to join the twentieth century along with the technology and the media. The people must be given more of the action. They should be encouraged to become involved in decision making.

In helping to solve environment problems (urban or non-urban) there is much they can and should do. The environment impact statement is one such way. This is a total assessment of the impact on the natural and social environment of the enactment of a decision. If goals are already present the impact statement can be compared with the goals. The public can participate in public hearings prior to the writing of a statement by the proposing agency. The public's approach to their environment tends to be more comprehensive than the bureaucrat pushing a particular program.

Other ways are being pioneered in the United States and they have relevance here. One is the enactment of legislation or constitutional amendments which declare that citizens have a right to a good environment. This enables the courts to be used in the resolution of disputes. Such an approach is law in Michigan and a parallel Bill sponsored by Senators McGovern and Hart before the United States Senate. Next Tuesday (November 7) citizens of Massachusetts will be voting to amend the Constitution to declare that:

'People have the right to clean air and water, freedom from excessive and unnecessary noise and the natural scenic, historic and aesthetic qualities of their environment, and that the protection of the right to the conservation, development and utilisation of agricultural, mineral, forest, water, air and other natural resources is a public purpose.'

Armed with such a constitutional amendment the courts can act as final defence of the people's rights and of the environment, if all else fails. There is no use talking about the rights of people unless there is some muscle behind them. This kind of right is a necessary balance to the power of the politician and the bureaucrat, who is, by the way, a public servant.

The environment impact statement together with its public hearings and the use of the courts as a last resort, will not only enable the people to be heard, but will enable them to act. They will update our political system and ensure that the natural and social systems upon which we all depend are managed for the benefit of all.

For professional people the interconnectedness of things means that they cannot pass the buck. Hiroshima caused a revolution of conscience amongst physicists. The revolution in molecular biology, with the implications for genetic manipulation and test tube babies produced a similar crisis of conscience amongst biologists. In these cases the implications of decisions made outside their fields of interest but related that they could not ignore such decisions. Today these scientists are working in a variety of organisations to ensure that their expertise is used for the benefit of humanity. For those professions working on urban problems and solutions, wholesale urban renewal has been their Hiroshima. The social tragedies of the Victorian Housing Commission redevelopment schemes, the total failures of similar schemes in American cities, have made urban planners

and architects realise the irresponsibility of dealing only with the physical framework.

Urban planners must be more human, more goal oriented, more research oriented, more curious about the function of the social environment they are planning. They must cease to work alone but work in multi-disciplinary teams with sociologists, ecologists, economists and a variety of other people to achieve a real stated goal. They need to draw a line with their own conscience by questioning the underlying wisdom of what they are being asked to do. Planners are integrators; they can realise on the ground the dreams of others, the results of research of other, but they must be part of a team.

Much of what we hold dear has been lost because an arbitrary boundary between one discipline and another has been used as an excuse for pretending not to see injustice being done. Every decision is a political decision and like all political decisions must be held accountable in terms of community goals, and not by reference to some unquestioned principle of some restricted discipline.

Professional people should ensure that their work achieves the real aims of conservation and social equality mentioned earlier. Too many planners are held to secrecy or conservatism because they work for the government or are held obligated to it. Not enough work directly for the people. This very unjust imbalance can be rectified in two ways. One by open government, whereby government employees are given the freedom normally held by other individuals; two, by the strengthening of public action groups, possible by special funding, without strings attached. Grants of the type now given to the Arts and the Australian Conservation Foundation are such examples. Such grants would help to redress the balance and to allow more professional people to work outside government on behalf of the people, especially those groups least able to either raise their voices or hire professionals to do it for them.

In the final analysis, we all have a job to do – to get on with solving the huge problems facing us. We must all become part of the team and work to common goals. Continuation of the present trends will mean eventual disaster for us all. We must join together and begin the task. The wave of nostalgia I mentioned at the beginning of this talk is the act of an ostrich trying to seek a return to the simple life which was never on, and in reality means a turning away from the complexity of the problem. Only by using human beings and technology together and by facing it as one large modern problem can it be tackled.