Decentralisation - Could it help our fast growing cities?

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Title

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Key Points   The single and perhaps most obvious point emerging from this research is that despite half a century of effort by governments to achieve a more even spread of population, our two biggest cities seem to be on a roller-coaster of growth whilst dozens – perhaps hundreds - of smaller cities and towns have stalled or even declined. So, what is new? The literature leads into some interesting territory.

The concept of '**subsidiarity**' – bottom up instead of top-down decision making – is taking hold in the regions. Surprising though it may seem, the Commonwealth again seems to be getting serious in its efforts to re-visit the search for a **national urban settlement policy**, linked to **migration** programs designed to favour the regions rather than the capital cities. Examples of Richard Florida's '**creative cities'** seem to be emerging as the recognition spreads that there are more things in this world than pipes and wires and shopping malls. The tattered old notion of '**balanced development'** has almost disappeared, to be replaced by a new and dynamic spirit of **regionalism**. But demographers are still grappling with the challenges of measuring and analyzing **population movement, growth, ideal city size, survival thresholds, 'sponge cities**, and the like. Over and above all these themes we have the impact of the **digital revolution** - the '**information superhighway'** – the push for **high-speed intercity rail** links, and new thinking about how to manage and stimulate **regional economies**. Some old questions survive. What exactly is '**regionalism**'? Is federalism the answer? And what about the **politicians, leadership**, the continuing pre-occupation with the short-term fix instead of the long-term vision?

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Context

The study has been undertaken at a time when federal governments are showing increasing interest in urban and regional development, migration policy, population management and the growing imbalance between the capital cities and the bush – with Sydney and Melbourne being central to the dilemma. At the same time demands from the regions for more hard and soft infrastructure are growing. The popular press is full of stories about metropolitan congestion, over-loaded infrastructure, escalating housing costs, and declining environmental quality. Central to the debate is the continuing friction between the three levels of government as they grapple with complex problems of planning and management at the regional level. The recent renaissance of interest in national urban policy at the federal government level may be good news for the nation's non-metropolitan cities and regions; but as the record so clearly shows, policy is not enough. The Victorian Plan Melbourne's Regional Partnership model may be the way to go.

Sources

The literature is extensive, going back at least half a century. A selective approach was taken, concentrating on a limited number of individual writers and researchers, together with a significant archive of official papers from federal, state and local government sources. Much of the material collected from the private sector tended to be descriptive rather than analytical, with robust critical analysis being difficult to locate. Key sources included

Alexander,S, and Mercer,D,2007,Internal Migration in Victoria, Australia – testing the 'sponge city' model, *Urban Policy and Research,* Vol.25,No.2

Budge,T, and Butt, A, 2007, 'What about Australia's small cities: do they have their own planning and development agenda? *La Trobe University, Planning Program School of Social Sciences*

Collitts, P, 2017, *Support for start-ups in regional NSW,* submission to NSW Government Inquiry into Regional Development.

Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, *House of Representatives Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation Issues Paper, CoA Canberra.*

Florida, Richard, 2005, *Flight of the Creative Class,* Harper Collins.

Hugo, P et al, 2013, *internal migration and regional Australia 2006-2011,* University of Adelaide and Regional Australia Institute.

Regional Australia Institute, 2017, *Submission to the House of Reps, Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation,*

Key Findings

Decentralisation and metropolitan growth

As a policy instrument, decentralisation has failed. It has never been instrumental in retarding metropolitan growth. Despite high hopes and a proliferation of well-intended policies, governments generally have failed to deliver. The demographic context has also been poorly understood, as virtually all projections of population growth in Sydney and Melbourne have been understated. It seems that the only practical way to retard metropolitan growth is to reduce migrant intakes – a controversial proposition awaiting more research and difficult decisions by a national government.

Potential for regional growth

There is limited potential. Governments can nominate preferred centres for investments in hard and soft infrastructure and job creation but the latter will continue to depend almost completely on private sector effort. More small towns outside the shadow of the regional centres will suffer decline unless they can 'rediscover' themselves. Governments can do more to place agency staff in regional centres (despite their poor record to date). Regional centres themselves will benefit from internal migration, from a determined continuation of self-promotion, and possibly from the Richard Florida 'creative places 'model. Overall, growth will be small with negligible impact on growth in the capital cities. The Commonwealth could decide to direct incoming migrants to spend time in the bush. The Commonwealth could also work with a state or private entity to invest in a major infrastructure project (e.g. High-speed rail or large wind-solar farm) as a stimulant to growth in a regional location. The growing differential between house prices in the city and country will add to the attractions of small-town life but overall the numbers will be small.

<u>What infrastructure can be seen as an essential pre-requisite for sustained growth in regional centres?</u>

Top of the list would be 'hard' infrastructure such as roads, bridges, water storages, communications in every form. Major regional centres will increasingly need fully-equipped base hospitals with research facilities and aged-care back up. Regional university campuses can help retain young people as well as contribute to the "Florida factor" as a stimulant to creative activity and parallel investments in well-equipped facilities for the performing and creative arts. Libraries are a must, along with quality secondary schools and TAFE. Heritage places are evidence of a responsible attitude to the past. Good architecture and urban design – especially in the main street – will help to show the world that the town in question is interested in quality as well as quantity. Housing choice is becoming more important as smaller households increase in number and add to the demand for compact houses and apartments.

Implications for Practice

Urban planners need to recognise that old models of subdivision and infrastructure provision may not meet the new needs of regional towns and cities as housing tastes change, as globalisation impacts on the working environment, as recreation and leisure preferences lead to new demands in urban design, open space planning and transport. Architects can make a difference between a dull, uninteresting townscape and one which reflects contemporary standards and demands. Bureaucrats at every level of government need to reflect yet again on the potential which exists for spirited collaboration with regional communities and NGOS, and this includes greater commitment to locating key decision-makers in regional centres. Capital city planners need to give special regard to the links between planning at metropolitan, regional and local levels.