

When it comes to housing affordability debates, everything old is new again

Written by Rae Dufty-Jones, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Western Sydney University



Barnaby Joyce and Scott Morrison have channelled 1940s-era debates in their comments on housing affordability. AAP/Sam Mooy

As politicians across Australia [grapple with a fix](#) for housing affordability, you might be forgiven for thinking this was the first time the nation has confronted a crisis in housing. But analysis of documents from the reconstruction period following the second world war finds that, as the war was drawing to a close, concern was building about housing availability and affordability.

Some of the issues, arguments and solutions being presented today are extremely similar to those consuming Australian politicians and policymakers three-quarters of a century ago.

Housing and fertility

Treasurer Scott Morrison [recently asserted](#) that the housing affordability crisis was so severe that:

People are putting off when they buy their house. They are even putting off when they have kids so they can save more.

The links between housing affordability and the fertility of the national population are difficult to make at the best of times. But Morrison is not the first to make this connection.

In 1944, housing reformer Oswald “Oz” Barnett connected the declining national birth rate with a lack of quality and affordable housing. [He argued](#) that the:

... tragic lack of decent dwellings is rapidly leading us along the road to national race suicide [...] One cannot blame a woman for refusing to bring a baby into the world [...] nor blame the

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expectant mother, when her baby does come, for refusing to have another baby until she is able to obtain a house.

Similarly, in its second interim report in 1944, the [Commonwealth Housing Commission](#) reasoned that the lack of affordable housing stock available was “one of the major factors in the limitation of families” and the “alarming decline in the Australian birth rate”.

Rural spaces as the solution

While rural Australia had its own housing problems – and [still does today](#) – it also offered a solution to the problem of a low national birth rate. Sidney Luker, a civil engineer and town planner in New South Wales,

[observed that](#)

the decline in the national fertility was “naturally more apparent in the capital cities than in the country”.

His solution? Get people to move to the country via decentralisation policies.

Not only were those living in rural Australia more likely to have children, but life in the country was argued to be naturally superior. Journalist and historian [Charles Bean](#) argued that “decentralisation” was necessary for the “health, conveniences and improvement of the big cities”.

Architect, town planner and key contributor to the Commonwealth Housing Commission [Walter Bunning](#)

also believed that decentralisation would improve “housing conditions” and reduce the time workers spent travelling to their places of employment. This would prevent people from becoming a “race of ‘straphangers’” – people spending a long time on transport to and from work.

Such arguments are eerily similar to those we hear today about the costs of congestion that come with affordable housing being on the outskirts of our major cities.

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Earlier this year, Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce [argued that](#) home buyers who couldn't afford property in the major cities should consider moving to regional Australia. He said "there are other parts of Australia" to buy housing.

Housing affordability and political risk

Political and policy minds were also focused on fixing housing problems during the 1940s due to the risk of political discontent.

The [Council of Social Services NSW](#) explained:

Bad housing fosters the growth of anti-democratic opinion – the frame of mind of the 'have not'.

Similarly, [Barnett](#) and fellow social housing campaigners Walter Burt and Frank Heath noted "an increasingly bitter contest between [...] capitalism [and ...] labour".

[Barnett](#) argued that this contest was being waged over housing:

The fight is centring on the struggles for houses for the people, [...] houses that they can rent, or buy, at prices within their capacity to pay.

Politicians and policymakers today have not made a direct connection between problems of housing affordability and the political instability that comes with it. But they are no doubt highly attuned to it. They need only look to the [US](#) and [Europe](#) and the part housing has played in contributing to political uncertainty in those places to understand the importance of tackling the problem in Australia.

Important differences exist between the the housing problems of 1940s Australia and those we

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confront in 2017. However, a historical perspective augments our understanding of contemporary housing debates and policies. It can provide more context and detail on potential ways forward.

Rae Dufty-Jones has received funding from the Australian Research Council and Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

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