

## No Australian city has a long-term vision for living sustainably. We can't go on like this

Written by Mike Berry, Emeritus Professor, RMIT University

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*This article is part of a [series](#) on rebalancing the human–nature interactions that are central to the study and practice of ecological economics, which is the focus of the [2019 ANZSEE Conference](#) in Melbourne later this month.*

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Australia was already [one of the most urbanised nations](#) by the end of the 19th century. Unlike European and North American countries, Australia's pattern of settlement did not have a neat urban hierarchy. The gap between the large and small towns was huge.

These patterns have intensified in the decades since federation, especially after the second world war. International and internal [migration trends have driven rapid growth](#) in the big cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney. This has created major problems with providing adequate [housing](#)

,  
[infrastructure](#)  
and  
[services](#)  
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The fundamental issue is the reluctance of urban communities and their leaders to discuss what might be sustainable populations.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*If we want liveable cities in 2060 we'll have to work together to transform urban systems\*\*\*](#)

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## The folly of unlimited growth

No Australian city has a long-term vision showing how a future stabilised population might be

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supported with the essential resources of food, water and energy. No Australian city has faced up to the inevitable social tensions of [increasing inequality](#) between a well-served inner-urban elite and an increasingly under-resourced urban fringe.

Leaders in cities that have not grown as rapidly, such as Adelaide, [lament their failure to grow like Sydney and Melbourne](#), despite all the associated problems. All implicitly believe unlimited growth is possible.

In reality, the expanding ecological footprints of the large cities have created unsustainable demands on land to support urban dwellers. And the wastes the cities produce are straining the capacity of the environment to handle these.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*What is 'ecological economics' and why do we need to talk about it?\*\*\*](#)

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Given the many unpriced flow-on effects from dense urban growth and market-led development, governments are struggling to deal with the undesirable consequences. [Congestion and pollution](#) threaten to overwhelm the many social and economic benefits of urban life.

The growth and concentration of populations are also driving chronic excess demand for appropriate housing. The result is [serious affordability problems](#), which are adding to inequality across society and generations.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*50 years after The Lucky Country, Australia's sustainability challenge remains\*\*\*](#)

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In 1970, urban historian [Hugh Stretton pointed](#) to the role of Australia's widespread owner occupation in offsetting the inequalities generated in labour markets and by inherited wealth. This is no longer the case.

The dominant neoliberal economic ideology has resulted in a [retreat from providing public housing](#). Abandoning would-be home-owners to the market has produced a situation in which urban land and house ownership is [reinforcing class-based inequalities](#). Home ownership is increasingly the preserve of the affluent and their children.

Housing-related inequality is also seen in the geography of our cities. [Poorer households are priced out of locations with better access](#) to good jobs, schools, transport, health care and other services.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*Our big cities are engines of inequality, so how do we fix that?\*\*\*](#)

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## Failures of governance

Governments in Australia's federation are poorly placed to respond adequately. [Responsibilities and fiscal resources are divided](#), creating obstacles to effective planning and infrastructure provision.

The main factor driving urban population growth is an unprecedented [rate of inward migration](#). The national government [sets large migration targets](#) as an easy way of creating economic growth. This leaves state governments with the impossible task of meeting the resulting demand for infrastructure.

Jane O'Sullivan [has shown](#) each extra urban citizen requires about A\$250,000 of investment.

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The total sum is well beyond the capacity of state and local governments.

Arguments between federal and state governments are heavily politicised, especially when it comes to major transport investments. Even within single jurisdictions, complex demands and unexpected consequences prevent effective action. The [waste recycling crisis](#) is a prime example.

State governments must also deal with difficult trade-offs between, for example, allowing further [development on the edges of cities](#)

or

[encouraging higher density in built-up areas](#)

. This often involves

[conflicts](#)

with local governments and communities, concerned to protect their ways of life.

Australian planners and governments have long tinkered with [policies to encourage decentralisation to smaller cities](#)

Despite these attempts, the dominant pattern of urbanisation with its seemingly intractable problems has hardened, a triumph of reality over rhetoric.

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**Read more:** [\*\*Our cities fall short on sustainability, but planning innovations offer local solutions\*\*](#)

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## What needs to change?

To get beyond the rhetoric and make our cities more sustainably liveable requires a much more deliberate and interventionist role for government. It also requires residents of our cities and suburbs to be willing to allow their governments to interrupt business as usual.

This, we know from experience, is a big ask. It will step on the toes of the [property lobby](#) and

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ordinary home owners. In some cases, for example, the short-term financial interests of property owners are leading local authorities to ignore scientific warnings about the impacts of climate change on coastal development.

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**Read more:** [Water may soon lap at the door, but still some homeowners don't want to rock the boat](#)

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Major changes are also needed in how urban land is taxed and the proceeds invested. "Simple" reforms like [replacing stamp duty on land transfer with a universal land tax](#), as the [Henry Tax Review](#) recommended, will take political courage that has been absent to date.

More complex policies like finding ways of diverting population growth to non-metropolitan regions will take careful thought and experimentation. This might include relocating government agencies to provincial cities. This has been tried sporadically in the past at the [federal](#) level and in states such as

[Victoria](#)

and

[New South Wales](#)

. However, such cases tend to be one-offs and do not reflect an overall strategic plan.

Future generations will inevitably be critical of the complete failure of current leaders to plan for sustainable development.

*Mike Berry has received funding from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, an independent organisation funded by universities and the nine federal, state and territory governments, and the Australian Research Council.*

*Ian Lowe was president of the Australian Conservation Foundation from 2004 to 2014. He is now chair of the Wakefield Futures Group.*

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