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Balance Victoria: Prospects for decentralisation

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1. Introduction:

Decentralisation in Victoria

We live in the urban century. More than ever, the effects of the competitive advantage of proximity are evident, in rapid urbanisation – and its corollary; depopulation of rural and regional areas. This phenomenon has spawned a myriad of analyses, and of policy responses. Some are more triumphalist than others, and some are more considerate of a sense of lost 'balance' and a need to attend to regions and their needs.

Meanwhile, in the major cities, urban quality is increasingly challenged, with increased congestion associated with increasing burdens on private car commutes. Many reasons have been cited to explain lagging infrastructure and failing compact city planning orthodoxy¹, including piecemeal responses², poorly located development³ and lagging energy efficiency performance relative to the US, the UK and Canada⁴. Supply-side research explores innovation in housing production towards more affordable models, while demand-side research captures exacerbating socio-spatial exclusion and affordability concerns⁵. Overall density gains are marginal and design and build quality are frequently poor⁶. Critical factors include planning and urban governance⁷; housing markets⁸, and the housing development sector⁹. Forgoing sustainable design to reduce up-front housing costs exacerbates social inequality by limiting access to low-bills housing¹⁰.

There are three scenarios that could address this challenge. The first is continued suburban growth, modified with better up-front infrastructure to reduce congestion and better design and liveability outcomes. This would likely see more density introduced to new suburbs and would require a shift in financing arrangements for infrastructure. The second is planning-led intensification around activity nodes, often transit oriented, as found in elements of current metropolitan plans. The third is decentralisation, in the form of purposive dispersion to existing and/or new medium-high density 'second cities', linked to existing cities with appropriate transit systems. This third option is the focus of this report.

The Aim of this review study is to assess the prospects for a formal decentralisation program for Victoria – based upon achieving planned new cities and disbursed growth to these new purpose-built regional cities.

1.1. Principles for decentralisation in Victoria

A common perception is that Australia has already attempted decentralisation, and that these attempts have “failed”. This preconception relies on several related judgements, each of which deserve further consideration. The 'failure' hypothesis encapsulates considerable omissions, conflation and misrepresentations of the available evidence. This report will

¹ (Forster 2006)

² (Newton and Glackin 2014; Ruming 2010)

³ (Phan et al 2008)

⁴ (Horne and Hayles 2008)

⁵ (Hulse et al 2011; Spiller 2011)

⁶ (Newton and Glackin 2014)

⁷ (Gleeson et al 2012; Gurran and Phibbs 2013)

⁸ (Burke and Hulse 2010; Randolph and Tice 2013)

⁹ (e.g. Dowling 2005; Ruming 2010; Chandler 2009)

¹⁰ (e.g. Morrissey and Horne 2011; Randolph et al 2008)

challenge the assumptions that underpin such perceptions. It is based on a literature review and historical analysis of attempts to divert growth (economic and population) away from principal urban centres, towards different cities, different city forms, and/or towards more distributed regions. We analyse key drivers of efforts toward decentralisation, and identify key issues in contemporary debates. In particular we point to a lack of clarity in definitions of decentralisation and related terms (such as regionalisation) and of what the associated metrics of success might be; and to narratives that inaccurately normalise and essentialise the primacy and authenticity of existing cities. We argue that an uncritical rejection of the prospects for decentralisation takes a passive view of centralisation and of the nature of social change or government action. We draw on case studies to argue that significant decentralisation, or meaningful new settlements in Victoria, is neither a given nor a learned “failure”, but would require:

- a) land acquisition and coordination powers;
- b) coordination and bipartisan, long term commitments, and;
- c) prioritisation of investment in supporting infrastructure and services.

These are functions of government that shaped or even defined earlier periods of settler-colonial settlement, but which were subsequently dismantled and indeed have been variously rejected by some quarters as risking undermining the primacy and workings of the property market.

Victoria's history shows how land and infrastructure-based initiatives to periodically open up the regions have either been left to dwindle or have been purposefully dismantled. In contrast, centralisation, intensification and suburban expansion of Melbourne have been supported through sustained alignments of efforts, including public policy.

In order to be meaningful and actionable as a policy, in this report we argue that defining decentralisation policy is critical (but is surprisingly absent from prevailing narratives). There must be clear definition of what is being de-centred (e.g. only population, or infrastructure?), how, and why. These questions ought to be considered alongside, if not before, decisions are made regarding where the location of such decentralisation.

The remainder of this report is organised into the following sections:

- Section 1.2 uses the example of the discussion paper “Victoria's Future State” (2018) to demonstrate how pervasive narratives and stories of urban structures and regionalisation can be.
- Section 2 introduces the concept of decentralisation, charting definitional and policy concerns.
- Section 3 introduces Victoria from an historical and recent decentralisation perspective.
- Section 4 takes a case study approach to considering decentralisation as an institutional and policy object. In so doing, it also presents in-depth case studies, bringing a new perspective to Canberra as a successful product of regionalisation, as well as case studies on British post-war new towns, Elizabeth in South Australia, Milton Keynes in the UK, and decentralisation under the Whitlam Government.
- Section 5 returns to the topic of decentralisation efforts in Victoria, and provides contemporary analysis of the (unfinished) regionalisation project.
- Section 6 draws together discussion and conclusions.

The case studies provide insights to inform prospective decentralisation in Victoria. The case of Canberra illustrates that successful new cities can be established in Australia's hinterland, albeit under the specific circumstances and, arguably, advantages, of having the title of seat of Government. The Canberra case illustrates not only the sorts of policy settings and commitment required, but also the timelines required, and some indications of the opposition that can be expected. Parallels in this sense can also be found in the story of Milton Keynes.

The UK's post-war new towns programme was founded on a modernist structural planning paradigm, which translated into fixed visions about decanted city citizens moving to commuter towns. The plan came with expectations of anchor employers and of what makes a good life and a good town. Flexibility was not always built in to these fixed visions. When realities did not match the plan, such as in Newtown, the project slowed and stalled. Elizabeth provides another example of the challenges of planning around key single industry anchor employers. Elizabeth's inability to continue to function as an economically viable, discrete "new town" can be attributed to the lack of adequate supporting policies, and insufficient consideration of the role of economic and social diversity in creating sustainable cities. Elizabeth has much in common with suburbs and older towns built around manufacturing or other large employment bases - such areas are necessarily vulnerable to the economic fortunes of the industries to which they are so closely associated.

Milton Keynes provides an exception in that it grew rather slowly, but had built in flexibility, such as easements in the central boulevards for as yet unknown future cabling. A large and public focused, vocationally oriented and accessible University was also a boost for a city that became well connected via an upgraded train service to key centres including London.

The most prominent set of policies around decentralisation developed in Australia was that initiated by the Whitlam government during the period 1972-1975. In the Australian context, dismissive attitudes to decentralisation have been politically dominant in the years following the Whitlam government dismissal, where the "failures" of those policies have been widely understood as part of the intrinsic "failures" of that government and its policies. This narrative is necessarily limited, of course, by the realities of that government being removed and its policies either wound back or cancelled. Such narratives of the inherent failure of the Whitlam government have a specific function in that they maintain a status quo while precluding the reconsideration of a recent historical policy base which sought to transform that status quo through not only building "new towns" but also the wider politics of "the Program" which intended to reimagine Australian civic life.¹¹

While Albury-Wodonga has experienced significant administrative and logistical challenges, including those from the constantly shifting policy bases and approaches by subsequent governments, some degree of the town's expansion has been maintained and it has come to function as a significant regional centre for this reason. To some extent this can be seen in parallel to the case study of Canberra, where a resilient initial vision was sufficient to weather subsequent changes and evolution in policy. It also speaks to the capacity of a flexible process-based approach, which evolved to meet the needs of later economic and political times which differed from those in which initial planning took place.

Through our case studies we note the importance of coordination and bipartisan, and long-term commitments, and the prioritisation of investment in supporting infrastructure and services (both hard and 'soft', social infrastructure). At the same time we note the vulnerability of any policy or settlement to changes in the economic assumptions around which they are based (be it resources, agriculture, state-sponsored electricity, manufacturing, or other). In the longer term it is (paradoxically) a flexible approach to the control of urban form that proves adaptable to disruption. At the outset, however, land acquisition and consolidation is necessary - we note that land acquisitions and corporations are a theme of executed new towns, from Milton Keynes to Elizabeth, and from Canberra to Albury-Wodonga. Planning for decentralisation can take various forms, but all involve state intervention in land consolidation and resale of land/development rights, and infrastructure sequencing at the state level. Historically, in Victoria, land acquisition and assembly has characterised regional settler-colonial settlement. It characterised (in different forms) the earlier, grander-scale decentralisation and new cities. It is this direct engagement in land rights and planning, and in longer-term infrastructure investment, that has declined in scope since the 1970s.

In contemporary Victoria, expansion of existing towns is possible through building out existing subdivisions within

¹¹Macintyre in Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government's 21st Century Agenda.

township zoned areas. Otherwise, a 'new town' would run so counter to norms of strategic planning and legislation as to require political level support. New settlements aside, redevelopment or reinvestment in existing regional areas depends both on state (or occasionally federal) government decisions; and on the decisions of global firms. Proposals for change are mainly driven by regional town coalitions (Shepparton) or by private investors. Settlement is passive and market-led, and yet highly regulated into narrowly defined possibilities. Victoria currently has few if any direct roles in land assembly, and planning is reactive rather than proactive, including the Precinct Structure Planning (PSP) process for new suburban development. This would need to change if decentralisation is to be successful.

Drawing on the case study illustrations, Milton-Keynes in particular, we note that blueprints based on high density walkable orthodoxies may not be the best solution for decentralising efforts in Victoria. Instead a more open and porous, flexible mode of urban form is called for that proves adaptable to future shocks and disruption. Soft infrastructure in the form of an engaged, heard and empowered community is also important. Open dialogue and a flexible form provides routes to reconciliation, to engagement with nature and the environment, as well as to sustainable economic activity.

A more nuanced and considered engagement with what types of change might be pursued, and for the benefit of whom, would facilitate a more realistic and grounded approach to policy development than a wholesale rejection of newness in itself. While not presuming that policy can direct or control social and economic outcomes in place, recognising the (intentional or otherwise) role of past decisions in present outcomes is a way to develop a sense of responsibility for past, present and future communities.

This suggests a role for government that is coordinated and active, but also not focused narrowly on regulations or on immediate outcomes. To instigate long range commitment to settlement in Victoria would require questioning the assumed 'authenticity' argument around Melbourne and indeed existing settlements, and to interrogate assumed default or organic patterns of growth.

1.2 Victoria's Future State and beyond

The discussion paper "Victoria's Future State", written by Steve Bracks and Pat McNamara, opens by drawing on the scenarios for Melbourne's future growth presented in Infrastructure Australia's February 2018 report "Future Cities"¹². These three scenarios comprise:

- An Expanded Low Density model, where Melbourne's outward boundaries expand significantly through construction on greenfield land on the urban periphery, where population growth will be housed;
- A Centralised High Density model where "80% of population growth [over the next 50 years] is located in established areas"; and
- A Rebalanced Medium Density model which skews population growth towards the western regions of Melbourne.¹³

"Victoria's Future State" proposes that these three models correlate to three international urban models: Los Angeles, New York, and London.¹⁴ This analogy is a useful one in provoking an initial discussion of urban policy, in that it invokes high-status, recognisable international cities which are at once significant economic centres, and also exert significant cultural influence. By virtue of this economic and cultural influence, their urban forms are also easily rendered symbolically,

¹² Steve Bracks and Pat Macnamara, "Victoria's Future State: Why Decentralisation Should Be Our Priority," (Balance Victoria, 2018).

¹³ "Future Cities," (Infrastructure Australia, 2018).

¹⁴ "Victoria's Future State: Why Decentralisation Should Be Our Priority."

almost as archetypes, and this helps articulate broad-based images of the divergent paths which Melbourne's future development might take.

This image of a city as understood in popular culture and even in broader analysis, however, is by its nature an abstraction from the reality of that city as experienced on the ground, or when viewed in its fuller historical context. The idea of New York, for example, as an aspirational, dense, hypercapitalist city, derives from a narrow symbology of the island of Manhattan, universalised out to reflect the entirety of the city's boroughs. This symbol necessarily neglects the way in which New York's dense Manhattan structure is fed by and sustained by a far wider low-density network of residential, logistical and commuter suburban ecologies, spreading outward into the five boroughs, and beyond, well into New Jersey.¹⁵ The popular image of New York as contained and dense is a narrow definition of the actual functioning, scope, and size of that city, and overlooks the structures that maintain New York's central density. In this sense, New York's broader megalopolis form more closely resembles the popular imagination of an outwardly sprawling Los Angeles rather than that assumed from a narrower symbolic framework. Moreover, as Paul Mees noted in a 2009 study, density in Los Angeles is higher than in New York, and indeed, higher than Australian cities. The popular ideal that Los Angeles is all low density, endless sprawl is at odds with its morphological reality.¹⁶ This is significant, in that the use of symbolic misrepresentations in preference to evidence-based actualities speaks to a broader tendency to use urban typologies as abstracted ideal types, interchangeable across regional, national and historical contexts, rather than specifically responding to their immediate contexts.

Another case study where the invocation of a symbol potentially obscures the capacity for detailed policy engagement is in the characterisation of London, which "Victoria's Future State" describes as "medium-density housing spreading a growing population more evenly through existing suburbs."¹⁷ This definition of London risks presenting that outcome as a natural product, rather than having been achieved by intervention, including, specifically, planning and decentralisation programmes.

"Victoria's Future State" proposes a further example to this urban symbolic rubric, a "fourth option" where "via a planned and long-term (30 plus year) decentralisation program, Victoria grows its existing regional cities and develops new ones in order to divert future growth out of Melbourne and across our state".¹⁸ This clearly evokes a policy intent which has been attempted in Australia, but widely assumed to have failed. It has, however, also been developed, and evolved over time, in the British new town planning context at several points during the 20th Century, including the immediate post-war era, and then continuing episodically until the handover of powers from new town development corporations in 1992.

London's "even" and "medium density" form is often understood as an alternative model to Los Angeles, which is understood as "low-density development see[ing] suburbia continu[ing] to sprawl ever outwards."¹⁹ During the 1930s, however, as London's outward growth was fuelled by the wider adoption of the motor-car, and by the growth of suburban "Metro-land" associated with the development of the London Underground and the expansion of an associated commuter economy, the growth of London was understood in very similar terms.²⁰ J.B. Priestley's 1933 "English Journey" commented negatively on the way in which urban London was "ribboning" out into the countryside without adequate regulation and restraint.²¹ This potential for London's outward reaches to continue to expand was latterly understood as

¹⁵ Robert Lang and Paul Knox, "The New Metropolis: Rethinking Megalopolis," *Regional Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009).

¹⁶ "LA is considerably denser than all Australian cities, even allowing for the understatement of the Australian figures created by the differing definition of urban areas." Paul Mees, "How Dense Are We? Another Look at Urban Density and Transport Patterns in Australia, Canada and the USA," *Road & Transport Research* 18, no. 4 (2009).

¹⁷ Bracks and Macnamara, "Victoria's Future State: Why Decentralisation Should Be Our Priority."

¹⁸ "Future Cities."

¹⁹ Mark Clapson, *Anglo-American Crossroads: Urban Planning and Research in Britain, 1940-2010* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

²⁰ Wolfgang Voigt, "The Garden City as Eugenic Utopia," *Planning Perspectives* 4, no. 3 (1989). Clough Williams-Ellis, *England and the Octopus* (Glasgow: Golden Gragon, 1975).

risking resembling the sprawl of settler-colonial cities such as Los Angeles. Fears of Britain coming to resemble America, reflecting an inversion of the colonial order, has helped shape the language through which fears about the changing British urban landscape have been expressed since at least the 1920s.²²

The popular ideas of London, Los Angeles, and New York as fully distinct urban types is clearly more complex when these cities are viewed in the context of their actual form and their respective planning histories.

This brief introduction to urban symbolism demonstrates the power but also the limitations of city stories as a means to articulate potential scenarios for Melbourne's future growth. The provocation of these comparisons is a worthy starting point and a call to action, which must be followed by a more detailed examination of the types of policy, historical precedent, and broader social context shaping policies of decentralisation and regional development. Comparative frameworks provide an aid in conceptualising the challenges, scope, and direction of public policy on regionalisation. Drawing on a range of detailed analyses of urban planning policy creates opportunity for a meaningful, rigorous and responsive analysis which is attuned to the complexities of historical change, and is able to inform positive policy making.

Numerous significant examples exist of decentralisation and regional planning policy that inform policy options for shaping the forms and directions of Victoria's future economic and population growth. By appraising these, it is possible to reinterrogate, challenge and avoid some of the common pitfalls of planning policy. This allows for a fresh consideration and contextualisation of practice, indicating that current accepted logics and policy options are not the only ones available, and that they are not neutral or inevitable. To actively reconsider the history of urban planning in the context of contemporary policy is to invite consideration of the ways that things can be otherwise; that the present moment has been shaped by the legacies of longer-term practices and approaches, and to consider contemporary policy not simply as reactive to imminent and short-term desires and needs, but as potentially transformable and providing the potential to shape new legacies.

This report presents an overview of the key conceptual and historical threads that underpin contemporary urban planning policy in Victoria. It provides a critical overview of the strengths, limitations, and risks of decentralisation policies in the contemporary context. Analyses of previous responses to the challenges of population growth, infrastructural development, and sustainable urban planning can help focus and direct contemporary thinking in response to the present historical moment. Moreover, this creates the opportunity for Melbourne's future growth to go beyond merely replicating or rejecting the "idea" of London, New York, or Los Angeles, and instead to embrace its own specific identity, form and context.

²¹ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: William Heinemann, Victor Gollancz, 1934).

²² Libby Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* (Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co, 2010); Lauren Pikó, "'We're Full': Capacity, Finitude, and British Landscapes, 1945-1979," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 64, no. 3 (2018); Milton Keynes in British Culture: *Imagining England* (London: Routledge, 2019).

2. Defining decentralisation policy: When, where, by whom?

The perception of many in the urban planning profession, and in political analysis more broadly, is that Australia has already attempted decentralisation, and that these attempts have “failed”. This preconception relies on several related judgements, each of which deserve further consideration. In short, this ‘failure’ hypothesis encapsulates considerable omissions, conflation and misrepresentations of the available evidence. These can be broadly understood as follows:

1. That decentralisation policies have been maintained and systematically pursued in ways which would have allowed them to achieve something which might be defined as “success”. This is distinct from the reality that, having been proposed, perhaps initially applied, plans and policies have often been quickly abandoned, or tried half-heartedly or without systematic, long-range oversight. Failures thus more often stem from policy reversal rather than policy itself;
2. That decentralisation has failed. Missing from this conclusion is a clear definition of what failure entails, and how success or failure is measured;
3. That, given that decentralisation has been “tried” and has “failed”, so Australia is somehow immune to decentralisation and all decentralisation policies have intrinsic incapacities. Therefore there is no need to investigate the specific mechanisms that shaped the particular policy settings and failures that have taken place.

These interrelated arguments present the very notion of decentralisation in an Australian context as not only having failed in the past, but as categorically unable to succeed under any circumstances. This creates a closed logic loop that precludes decentralisation policies from being considered in significant detail as a policy option; it both retires the notion of decentralisation to a failed historical past, and renders it conceptually unable to be rehabilitated in a meaningful way. In a broader sense it feeds into a fatalistic, passive view of change and governance, which in practice, means both enshrining the status quo, and predisposing urban growth forms towards forms and terms dictated primarily by market forces, rather than broader social needs.

Such a view is not borne out by the evidence available both in Australia and internationally. By taking a critical longer view of the history of decentralisation policy in Australia and internationally, and examining these assessments in their political context, these two related assumptions cannot be said to be true. Moreover, dismissing any and all forms of decentralisation in this manner arbitrarily constrains policy options on a normative and historically inaccurate basis. Nonetheless, simplistic statements about Australia’s decentralisation history, and the existence of relevant historical models for decentralisation policy, continue to obscure and misrepresent historical realities for the purposes of constraining policy in the present.

Moving beyond these constrained definitions of decentralisation requires reconsideration of how the term itself is used, what it means, and who uses it, as well as who promotes decentralisation policy and to what ends. Decentralisation as a definition of policy is very broad, and is used in a range of contexts which are not always consistent with each other. It can incorporate many factors, spanning the organisation of economic, social, political and formal urban structures. In order to be meaningful and actionable as a policy, there must be clear definition of what is being de-centred, how, and why. Some of these questions include:

- What is to be decentralised? Population only? Infrastructure only? Industry only? Political powers? Which populations, which infrastructure, which industry, and which political powers?

- How is decentralisation understood as distinct from regionalisation or regional development? How might it relate to these approaches?
- Where is the new site to which these aspects are being re-located? How is this site chosen, and what methods are considered in selecting these new sites? Who is choosing such a site, and what level of participation is there in the selection process, amongst which groups?
- Who drives the decentralisation – to what extent is government involved? How is private sector involvement encouraged, and in what forms?
- What mechanisms are in place to de-centre the chosen forms, and to prevent their reintegration and expansion of the single central structure?

These questions must be considered alongside, if not before, decisions are made regarding the location of such decentralisation. Furthermore, the question of why decentralisation is being pursued very much shapes the forms it takes, and implies the types of metric which might be used to measure success in various capacities, whether formal, economic, demographic or in other forms.

This need for further definition is especially the case in an Australian framework where there are issues of political decentralisation to negotiate. Australia is federal, so the issue of centralisation of political power, taxation powers, and responsibilities for differing layers of urban and regional planning policy, is one which is also frequently discussed using a language of decentralisation, but which ironically can work against it, particularly where there are conflicting goals between state and federal governments. Where significant spatialised decentralisation policies have been pursued in Australia, they have usually required coordination between state and federal governments if not further coordination between multiple states, such as in the case of Albury-Wodonga.

Decentralisation can involve urban and regional planning through the planned relocation of infrastructure, population, industry and jobs, including government agencies. In the context of Australian regional development policy, decentralisation has historically been understood to be a process undertaken by government by which population and industry are moved, whether through direct or indirect means, from existing urban centres, to selected regional sites, for the purposes of redistributing or rebalancing geographically, demographically and economically in order to achieve particular policy ends. This has sometimes been accompanied by the intention to decentralise forms or aspects of government from a central seat of political power, such as through the relocation of government departments or the establishment of new regional governance arrangements.

Most frequently, in a Victorian policy context, “decentralisation” has referred to a combination of policies which are concerned with spatial planning and demography, including what has elsewhere been known as new town planning and population dispersal. Moreover, even when decentralisation is broadly defined as a geographical and demographic concern, there are further issues of definition to pursue in order to render such a policy actionable.

In this report, decentralisation policies are taken to be those which propose to redistribute population through pre-emptive spatial planning policies. Such policies, as discussed below, are rarely understood solely as policies of urban planning, but necessarily speak to wider systemic issues of governance, economic organisation, social inclusion, environmental and heritage factors which shape policies of decentralisation and the political value which is placed on such policy. Rather than seeking to present a singular definition, however, this report suggests that the potential strengths of decentralisation policy can be found in their variation rather than by a single blueprint solution. Functional, resilient and effective policies involving aspects of decentralisation have been characterised by their engagement with their unique circumstances, rather than their conforming to any single typology.

3. Settlement & centralisation in Victoria

In order to characterise efforts towards decentralisation in Victoria, it is useful to consider the factors that have shaped settlement patterns in the past, and those which continue to shape settlement and land use activities in Victoria now. This chapter considers these past and continuing factors shaping (centralised) settlement patterns, and their implications for efforts toward decentralisation.

Decentralisation is a principle framed in opposition to centralisation –meaning in this case, for the most part, the continued Central Business District (CBD) intensification and suburban expansion of Melbourne. The extent to which and the ways in which this occurs is itself the product of social structures and institutional settings, including both historical and ongoing public policy.

3.1 Land systems and colonialism in settlement patterns

Certain aspects of prevailing patterns of land settlement/displacement and land use stem from Victoria's (relatively recent) history of colonisation. Colonialism is a critical starting point in that it sought purposefully to assert a blank slate for land settlement, over long-established histories of indigenous inhabitants and land practices. While Indigenous people and practices have continued, the displacement embodied in the colonisation of Victoria involved the forceful projection of a specific system of land ownership, rights, and administration. In some senses all colonial cities as in Victoria are 'new' and decentralised.

Through colonialism, land is fundamentally held to be property of the Crown, from which basis it is leased, or sold through subdivision and land titling systems. This vests a level of central oversight in where settlement and population is located. In Victoria this central power has always been shared with the interests of private land speculators and developers, who rely on the legitimacy of property title systems, but who have often led proposals for new settlement schemes. Settlement – meaning in large part the subdivision and sale of Crown land - in colonial Victoria was historically (and in some ways continues to be) 'demand' based, with surveying of townships occurring in response to demand from leaseholders or informal settlers. In the case of what would later be Melbourne, the dubious treaty and private settlements pursued by Tasmanian settlers in the area were initially deemed invalid by the New South Wales colony, then legitimised through surveying and sale of land.

Earlier in the 19th century informal ("unlicensed") settlement/displacement and pastoral leases ("squatters") occupied areas of what would be Victoria through the establishment of "stations", in locations based on natural resources (principally waterways) and on successive expansion and frontier violence. Sealers and whalers in coastal areas were also present in earlier colonial contexts (for example, Portland). In the 1840s, the "special survey" system allowed essentially private subdivision and speculation on the establishment of towns more than 5 miles from the centre of Melbourne – examples include Kilmore, Port Fairy, Brighton and Doncaster. Subdivision into public towns involved surveyed private lots and also land 'grants' to public reserves, churches, asylums. Thus early settlements combined private speculators with public powers of land and its allocation to certain (value based) public purposes. A similar process continues today in subdivision approvals and Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs) for new suburbs.

While designated as a capital some years earlier, Melbourne is generally understood to have not become a city until

the gold rushes of the 1850s. During this period both Melbourne and goldfields areas – Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Wangaratta, and others around central Victoria – grew rapidly in size and wealth. In this period the populations both of gold rush settlements, Melbourne, and service towns along the routes between them, ballooned in a largely unplanned way. Most new goldfields towns followed a process of pastoral runs (squatters and stations), followed by informal settlement by gold prospectors, then proclamation of towns – with this involving official town surveys and land sales, incorporation of local government into cities and boroughs, the establishment of local and state level infrastructure, and eventually connection by rail transport.

Melbourne grew commensurately with the financial and administrative wealth stemming from goldfields, much of it directed to real estate speculation in the capital; as in the growth of Chicago, Melbourne grew from its surrounding regions.²³ Following the end of the Victorian gold rush most goldfields towns and cities rapidly shrank in population. With more industrialised intensive mining, employment in mines declined to a fraction of that of surface mining, and populations moved away. In some cases populations shrank so much as to effectively abandon towns, which also lost their municipality status. Nonetheless, large swathes of towns and cities established in this period continued as communities. Some continued to grow via later phases of economic focus – agriculture, public services, manufacturing, tourism - while others declined or disappeared. It is onto the patchwork of these former goldfields towns that some of the politics of present decentralisation debates in Victoria are cast.

With land and infrastructure (and communities) having been built up around the wealth of earlier economic booms, the question arises as to what extent these places could or should be continually adapted to new economic forces. For Victoria, the gold rush left a legacy of cities and towns – of property ownership, services and buildings, and of people and communities – for which the original economic motive for existence has either disappeared or its need for people (jobs) reduced. This is an ongoing tension in debates, and is one repeated for later phases and economic focus points of settlement.

Agriculture and particularly irrigation led agriculture through the late 1800s and into the mid 20th century can be similarly characterised as mining. In the 1890s in the wake of real estate bust and economic depression in Melbourne, the Victorian government through Closer Settlement legislation compulsorily acquired larger agricultural land and broke it into smaller parts in order to encourage settlement into smaller agricultural lots. Irrigation schemes including through the Waranga Basin project in the early 20th century served to 'open up' more parts of the State to agricultural settlement. This saw a host of towns either established or expanded, including major centres such as Mildura (which was, via its own irrigation legislation, founded as a temperance settlement). Irrigation settlements were led by and underpinned by state investment in water distribution projects. State railways also served to lead other growing agricultural centres. Much of the 19th and into the 20th century in Victoria involved projects of converting areas to settlement, usually though not exclusively through agricultural production. New townships in the Mallee and Wimmera region for example continued to be surveyed and proclaimed into the 1920s, typically following railway and/or irrigation connections.

The bulk of Melbourne's suburban rail network was constructed during the late 19th century, with significant funding for new rail lines building an extensive rail network, much of it to the benefit of land speculators in new suburban areas. Victoria Railways and Commissioners were set up in response to concerns about overspending and politically motivated investments, with one effect that financial conservatism saw comparatively few rail extensions to match suburban development throughout the 20th century.²⁴ New Victorian towns continued to require subdivision and permission from the Department of Crown Lands and Survey. The State Rivers and Water Supply Commission also had some level of control in where new settlements occurred. This period saw the escalation of the level of planning and control. The Soldier

²³ W. Cronon, *Nature's metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. WW Norton, 2009.

²⁴ Brian Carroll, *Australia's Railway Days: Milestones in Railway History*, Macmillan, 1976; Roger Wettenhall, *Railway Management and Politics in Victoria, 1856-1906: Report of a Case Study in the Origins of the Public Corporation*, Royal Institute of Public Administration. ACT Group, 1961.

Settlement scheme in the 1920s intensified regional growth – with compulsory acquisition of larger farm parcels, then distributed to returned servicemen subject to requirements to develop land parcels.

Overall, periods of growth in agricultural centres in Victoria were partly through the complex interplay between regional economies and commodities. Growth was facilitated by government protections for and subsidies of agricultural products. Intensification of agricultural production was also state supported, including through land settlement policies and through irrigation schemes and transport routes. However, a significant proportion of soldier settlement farms were subsequently abandoned, in part due to drought and depression, and in part due to economic shifts in the nature of agriculture. Farming became more mechanised, prices and returns lowered, and farms consolidated - with commensurate reductions in rural workforces and populations. As with the gold rush, small agricultural communities set up around this later set of conditions have become part of the debate around the need to retain communities that no longer offer an obvious spatial locational economic purpose.

The next phase of strong growth of Melbourne occurred after the Second World War, in a period of comparative wealth and a growing (auto-)mobility. Land use planning documents sought occasionally to reduce rising car travel, but also supported or required car-based development including through car parking.²⁵ The trend of expansion was reinforced by the growing car ownership as land that had been too far away from public transport stations could now be developed along newly built major roads and was needed to accommodate the rapid growth caused by baby-boom households and new immigrants.²⁶ As most train and tram lines were not extended during this time, newer areas were and are not as well served by public transport as the older parts of Melbourne.

This timing partly explains why Melbourne's transport infrastructure and services are unevenly distributed. Public transport, in terms of both extent and frequency of service, is concentrated in inner and to some extent middle suburbs. The first phase of strong suburban development in Melbourne took place during the public transport era as a classic example of the relationship between public transport and suburban development. With the occurrence of horse omnibuses, trams and railways, and their subsequent electrification the middle and upper classes and well-paid members of the working class were able to live in houses further away from the city, served by public transport.²⁷ These houses are located in today's inner and middle suburbs, mostly still along the same train and tram lines.

However, the later car-based settlements were driven by expansion of both state and private industry and manufacturing, with new or expanded towns and suburbs set up to house workers in these industries. New suburbs and towns were focused on a Fordist model of housing close to (but separated from) manufacturing employment. Goldfields towns like Wangaratta and Ballarat also became manufacturing bases. Wool-based towns and industries continued to grow in wealth through the post war period, including through export industries, but also through protection of manufacturing by tariffs. Victoria's wool prices (and wool-focused towns and industries) peaked in the 1950s. Most strikingly, Victoria's La Trobe Valley townships were developed as worker-focused housing for the SEC coal powered power stations in this period. Post-war, new settlement was closely tied to state industry – the expansion and creation of new towns with housing (including public housing) for workers. Moe-Yallorn was built up by the Victorian Housing Commission as a model town for SEC and related workers, including for expanding textiles and other manufacturing.

Concurrent to economic shifts, in post-war Victoria an active role was played by state agencies in establishing state industries, acquiring land, and developing housing. Further, in this period the planning and control of land use became

²⁵ E.J.Taylor & R. van Bommel-Misrachi, "The elephant in the scheme: Planning for and around car parking in Melbourne, 1929–2016," *Land Use Policy*, 60, 287-297.

²⁶ Ian Morison, "The corridor city: planning for growth in the 1960s." *The Australian metropolis: a planning history* (2000): 113-130.

²⁷ Andrew Beer and Clive Forster. "Global restructuring, the welfare state and urban programmes: federal policies and inequality within Australian cities." *European Planning Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 7-25; Helen Proudfoot, "Founding cities in nineteenth-century Australia." *The Australian metropolis: A planning history* (2000): 11-26.

formalised through town planning legislation and the emergence of zoning and strategic land use planning particularly for Melbourne. The 1929 Plan for General Development was the first strategic plan for Melbourne. It involved extensive survey work by an appointed commission and proposed processes for statutory planning across the metropolitan area, but was not actually implemented.²⁸ State level legislation for town planning was introduced to Victoria in 1944. The first implemented metropolitan level plan, the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme, was introduced in 1954.

Traditional suburban zoning, thought to have originated in response to demand from homeowners, is centred on the separation and protection of low-density detached housing. Historically, the location of higher density housing in Melbourne was determined by differential use of zoning, 'flat' codes and building standards. Basic building regulation powers, including minimum lot sizes, had been established for municipalities from 1915, predated by private covenants. Melbourne's Plan of General Development provided a model for voluntary land use zoning based on US precedents, partly rationalised by property value concerns.²⁹ Local planning controls were legislated in 1944, with building codes working alongside to regulate housing density. From 1944, the Uniform Building Regulations differentially applied classes of minimum allotment sizes, setbacks and frontages across the city.

In summary, the pattern of colonial settlement in Victoria from settler-colonisation until the late 1960s, and the role of government in these, featured:

- Land titles (and associated land systems and rights) including permission to subdivide titles:
 - Proclamation of town subdivisions
 - Incentives for agricultural freehold settlement – Free Selector, Closer Settlement, and Soldier Settlement legislation
- Local government formation including incorporation into municipalities
- The location of government offices and institutions
- Irrigation schemes for intensive agricultural settlement
- State or state-sponsored railways to connect to ports and open up new settlement areas
- State energy schemes (coal and hydroelectricity) in the post-war period
- State housing schemes and planned settlements centred on manufacturing, also in the post-war period
- Tariffs, tax protections, and tax incentives notably tariffs on imported goods
- Predominance of lower skilled or blue collar work, limited tertiary education, limited workforce participation by women, and limited workforce mobility overall.
- From the 1940s particularly - the control of land use and development, through zoning and strategic plans facilitating suburban growth in defined formats.

²⁸ R. Freestone, and M. Grubb, "The Melbourne metropolitan town planning commission, 1922-30," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 1998, 22(57): 128-144.

²⁹ Freestone and Grubb, "The Melbourne metropolitan town planning commission,"; Metropolitan Town Planning Commission, *Plan of General Development: Melbourne*, 1929.

3.2 The 1970s onwards: Deregulation, globalisation and planning

With the scaling back of import tariffs in the early 1970s and the exposure of Australian manufacturing to global competition, manufacturing-based settlements rapidly contracted and declined. For example, the ascendancy of Geelong was checked when it quickly became beset by employment and related problems. The auto manufacturing industry and associated housing had provided a boom prior to the deregulation of global markets in automotive manufacturing. In the 1980s, globalisation of markets continued apace through privatisation of national and state assets. In the La Trobe Valley, the privatisation of electricity fundamentally changed the economic base. In summary, restructuring and contraction and casualisation of employment played out in various ways across Victorian manufacturing based towns and suburbs, from Broadmeadows to Wangarratta. These same changes shaped the outcomes of towns designated as Melbourne satellite towns (Sunbury and Melton) through 1967-1974, which quickly contracted in terms of anticipated population and employment growth.

The descent of marginal post-industrial towns into poverty and associated depopulation of regions ushered in renewed anxieties about the growth of urban Melbourne and calls for decentralisation. Centralisation is understood in this sense as the dismantling of previous regional projects in favour of globalised trade. Centralisation is closely tied to deindustrialisation, and the increasing importance of service and financial sector employment agglomerated in the CBD. While undertaken for a range of policy and value reasons – not the least of which were the price and quality of consumer goods – these decisions also instigated another round of spatially uneven sorting of costs and benefits across Victoria, as wealth, opportunity and reward became increasingly concentrated in the CBD.

It is in this context that more recent regionalisation/decentralisation policies and initiatives have taken place, such as attempts to shift state service centres to regional locations. Post-1980s, the hegemony of globalised market logics is assumed. The advantage of capital cities is also assumed. Yet, these assumptions overlook the role of decisions made by government at multiple levels. These control where settlement has been permitted or incentivised, for whom and on what terms. Policy also shapes where broader economic trends play out. To a great extent present centralisation patterns and the debates around Melbourne's growth are the outcome of globalisation, competition, and deregulation, as interpreted, facilitated and mediated by policy settings. At the same time, many of the tensions around decentralisation and regional development stem from the fates of settlements – both in towns in rural areas, but also large cities and suburbs – either founded or substantially built up around past models of economic development and of the role of government.

These shifts are not simply constituted, nor are they the result of either policy failure or global inevitabilities. Rather, they are the result of alignments of interests and a plethora of events and circumstances that presented opportunities for such alignments to benefit in particular ways from centralisation. Thus, the decline of employment in agricultural areas through capital intensification, lower returns, and the agglomeration of farms pushed younger people to towns and cities for higher education, while at the same time restructuring of the economy began to favour new skills in financial services, for jobs based in cities. Despite improvements in agricultural efficiencies, slumping wool prices (also partly through tariff changes) impacted mills, textile manufacturing, and wool-based agricultural centres like Hamilton.

Indeed, in the case of both agriculture and manufacturing, increasing automation and efficiency reduced overall employment even when industries remained – a process that continues apace. Moreover, while the call for more infrastructure in the regions is often made to offset the proximity advantage of urban agglomeration, in fact, private car ownership and faster access through improved roads and railways reducing travel distances and times has in many cases simply hastened the shift to the cities in search of jobs. At the same time, the closure of rail lines is associated with the slow death of hitherto connected rural settlements. Whether such mobility is enhanced or reduced, the impact on centralisation/decentralisation is a function of other reinforcing factors around employment locations and opportunities. Ultimately, jobs locations, and the associated agglomeration advantages, have had a centralising effect in the absence of structural measures to foster alternatives.

Similarly, while market logics may have been a factor in the end of auto manufacturing and energy generating oligopolies

in regional Australia, there were also a range of other factors, ranging from the perceived ability of Governments to continue to support the industry, to a range of technology shifts in manufacturing processes, to the tactical decisions of global firms to move some operations and to close others. Such shifts also coincided with, variously;

- Closure of local health services and their amalgamation into major hubs (efficiency);
- Closure/reform of mental institutions for a variety of reasons, removing service sector employment (eg. Beechworth, Ararat);
- Rate capping (reducing financial autonomy of local government) and forced state amalgamation of Victorian local boroughs, reducing the number of local governments and also the number of sites for local government services;
- Tension around water rights and allocations, including increasing environmental concerns; and
- A rise in workforce participation by women, increasing workforce migration and instability.

These broader forces shaping economic and demographic patterns in Victoria have also been framed by changes in land use planning policy. The 1967 strategic planning document for Melbourne, *The Future Growth of Melbourne* was formed in response to population growth, and focused on considering different options for accommodating this growth.³⁰ It was this document that proposed the 'growth corridor' model of suburban development for Melbourne. Particularly from the late 1960s, land use planning introduced strategies and statutory instruments to limit – or rather to guide - suburban expansion into designated growth areas. Melbourne's growth was also zoned and segmented – limiting height and densities and land uses. While a formal growth boundary or green belt was not introduced, zoning and green wedges demarcated future urban uses from agricultural and other lower scale uses. These were also understood (more cynically) as 'road maps' for land speculators. Also in the late 1960s, planners viewed and identified 'satellite' towns that could absorb growth, e.g. Melton and Sunbury. These contracted in scale and role alongside the shrinking and agglomeration of employment opportunities.

The 1971 Planning Policies for Metropolitan Melbourne introduced the first corridor and development plans, seeking to ensure that essential services such as transport networks, schools and hospitals, water supply, sewerage, drainage, gas and electricity were integrated in newly developed areas.³¹ Previously, new areas were often lacking even basic infrastructure. The corridors defined areas into which new suburban growth would be directed, over 5-15 year time frames. The framework of these earlier plans was similar to current PSPs.

Planning controls including zoning categories demarcate 'rural' from 'urban' uses, with one implication being that changes to agricultural industries or industries in rural areas are limited to these categorisations. Another implication is that new speculative or demand led settlements – as characterised most of Victoria's history through to the second world war – are difficult to conceive of without high-level political engagement.

The 1971 Planning Policies for Metropolitan Melbourne formalised the growth corridor model proposed in 1967. The 1981 Metropolitan Strategy for Melbourne marked the beginning of major shifts in planning for the city. The strategy instigated urban consolidation policies – encouraging development in existing areas, redevelopment of redundant industrial areas, and concentration of mixed land uses. It signaled the winding back of some features of post-war zoning, and also of state-led housing and infrastructure. Urban consolidation amongst other considerations was intended to reduce the costs of urban development by making more use of existing infrastructure.

³⁰ Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, *The Future Growth of Melbourne: A Report to the Minister for Local Government on Melbourne's Future Growth and Its Planning Administration*. 1967.

³¹ Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, *Planning Policies for the Melbourne Metropolitan Region*, 1971.

Following an extended period of recession, Living Suburbs (1995) was the strategic planning document for Melbourne accompanying a process of scaling back of the planning system critically described as neoliberal.³² By this stage the metropolitan planning agency which had previously overseen planning schemes and financed metropolitan projects, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, had been disbanded. Preceding and accompanying the 1995 strategy were changes to the planning system across the state, particularly in relation to governance and to higher density housing. Local governments were amalgamated, and local codes and zones replaced with state standardised policy through the Victoria Planning Provisions (VPPs).

One stated goal of these changes was to remove or minimise impediments to the market, and to “provide a business environment conducive to sustainable long-term economic growth”. The 1995 plan discussed urban consolidation, primarily in terms of increasing housing choices in existing urban areas, seeking to “encourage the more efficient use of land and infrastructure and greater housing choice.” Reforms saw local codes limiting the construction of high density housing replaced with more discretionary design guides. Numbers of medium- and higher-density housing developments increased, despite political opposition from suburban residents.³³ In addition the 1990s saw state investment in events, branding, and in developments (such as Crown Casino). From this point, Melbourne planning focused on a duality of intense growth (largely from migration, both overseas and interstate), and growth management.

3.3 Settlement policy and levers today

It is in this context that post-millennium policy levers generally understood as shaping settlement patterns and having the potential to decentralise Victoria are a mixture of population policies to; intensify and vertically enhance Melbourne; ‘ease the burden’ on Melbourne, and; ‘reinvigorate’ regional areas. The latter two are sometimes conflated, but hinge on differences in what is sought to be decentralised (people, jobs) and for what purpose (to ease growth pressures, to develop other regions), and also how. Some policy ideas relate to the location of population, others to economic production – and the latter not always, given the effects of mechanisation across most industries, equivalent to where employment is located. In addition to the discussion above, policies and factors that might be considered forms of decentralisation in Australia/Victoria, include:

- Focus on Ballarat-Geelong-Bendigo for regional rail infrastructure. ‘Drift’ to Melbourne is in context of high overall growth in migration – cities including Geelong and Ballarat have been growing, but not to the sheer scale of Melbourne. They mainly have a commuter role.
- The expansion of Melbourne sees it absorb previously ‘regional’ areas (for example Mitchell Shire). Coastal areas, too, have expanded as commuter areas albeit restrained by environmental considerations.
- Regional fast rail proposals and their goals – Denham (2018) questions the extent which regional fast rail ‘irrigates’ regions or serves as commuter expansion for Melbourne.³⁴ This includes reconsideration of cycles of investment and disinvestment in public transport (e.g. many new and much-delayed rail lines are re-opening rural lines that were closed not that long ago – for example Mernda and Leongatha).
- Land and property based incentives to own land under certain conditions determined by government. Most

³² Gleeson, B., & Low, N. (2000). ‘Unfinished business’: Neoliberal planning reform in Australia. *Urban Policy and Research*, 18(1), 7-28; Glen Searle, and Richard Cardew. “Planning, economic development and the spatial outcomes of market liberalisation.” *Urban Policy and Research* 18, no. 3 (2000): 355-376.

³³ Lewis, M. B. (1999). *Suburban Backlash: The battle for the world’s most liveable city*. Bloomings Books.

³⁴ Todd Denham, “Regional Fast Rail and Regional Development: Irrigation or Desertification?” ATRF 2018 Proceedings, 2018.

obviously the first home owners grant for newly constructed homes has typically been larger for regional areas.

- Possible changes to administrative units (state, federal, local) and their centres / work forces

Into the 21st century, the prevailing factors shaping economic and demographic distribution in Victoria include less explicitly spatial factors such as:

- Global economies: higher paid high skills jobs in CBD locations - financial services, higher education
- The movement of capital and decisions by multi-national firms
- Shifts to a service and consumption economy including tourism and consumption of landscapes (aesthetic and heritage)
- International migration (amounts of, type of, and incentives for)
- The growth in the international tertiary student market
- Tourism, events, and place branding including by governments
- Interstate and intrastate migration – with net migration to Melbourne positive following a slump / loss in the early 1990s in particular.
- New institutional investment – primarily in prisons (e.g. Ararat)
- First home-buyer incentives and other taxation arrangements for housing
- The Keynesian role of Australian housing construction industry – used to respond to threats of economic downturn³⁵.
- The house building / volume builder industry, including the segmentation of builders into CBD focused and fringe, volume builder focused industries relying largely on sub-contractors.
- Landowners and speculators on the suburban fringe.³⁶

Victoria's current spatial controls on land use and development shape the type and location of growth:

- Land titling and subdivision rules
- Land use zoning, strategic planning, and other controls on development based on type and location
- Growth in new settlements mainly limited to Precinct Structure Plan (PSP) areas: new suburbs on the urban fringe. Shaped by underlying demand but also institutional limits on the extent to which a 'new' town might be possible or supported

³⁵ E. Taylor, & T. Dalton, "Keynes in the antipodes: the housing industry, first home owner grants and the global financial crisis," *Housing in 21st-Century Australia: People, Practices and Policies*, 2015: 153-172.

³⁶ Dalton, T. R., Hurley, J. R., Gharaie, E. R., Wakefield, R. R., & Horne, R. R. "Australian suburban house building: industry organisation," *Housing, Theory and Society*, 16(3) (2013): 106-21.

- Water catchment restrictions
- State transport infrastructure and willingness (or otherwise) to pay for it
- Delineation of agricultural areas through agricultural zoning and minimum lot sizes
- Environmental protection legislation, environmental impact assessments, and protections on undeveloped areas.
- Rezoning, subdivision, and planning permit approval processes
- State centralized planning schemes since the mid 1990s through the Victoria Planning Provisions – with limited role for local governments and local decision making
- For new suburbs – PSPs are an additional process functioning as precursor to rezoning, subdivision, and permit approval in new suburban areas in designated growth areas.

It is within this policy context that the prospects for successful decentralisation in Victoria can be evaluated. In the next section we present a number of case studies as a means to contrast with and also provide different stories of decentralisation. In Section 5 we will return to Victoria and take stock of the events and circumstances of decentralisation, taking into account the case study experiences in Section 4.

4. Decentralisation policies: Using historical case studies to consider the present

This section presents historical case studies of decentralisation from the UK and Australia outside Victoria, in order to illustrate the processes by which related policies have been developed. Examples are explored of Canberra; British post-1945 reconstructionist planning; Elizabeth South Australia; Milton Keynes 1967; and Whitlan government decentralisation projects (including Monarto and Albury-Wodonga) of the early 1970s.

In order to make considered, functional regional development policy, there needs to be definition of decentralisation as a policy option, but also further and more explicit definition of what contemporary policy problems exist, whose solutions might include a form of decentralisation. In order to render these questions more precisely and clearly, considering how decentralisation has been defined historically, in Australia and internationally, allows for a more thorough engagement with the development of policy and its capacity to meet challenges, adapt and change. Considering what decentralisation has meant, and how it has functioned, therefore can provide a basis for thinking about what it might mean and how it could function in the future.

This is best achieved by a longitudinal and generally chronological consideration of decentralisation policy. This allows consideration of the influence of long-range political, social, and economic trends, alongside practical approaches to demography and regional planning policy. By approaching issues of contemporary policy through a historical lens, it is possible not only to learn from the content of earlier approaches, but also from the way in which they relate to their broader contexts; to learn from the processes of policy formation, as well as the content of the policies themselves.

4.1 Canberra

The idea of what constitutes Australian decentralisation is often measured very narrowly, inaccurately normalising capital cities and “historic” regional cities, overlooking their recent establishment through settler-colonialism and excluding the example of Canberra. Canberra’s development was by its nature an isolated and self-limited project of a singular urban development undertaken for the purposes of housing structures of government. While its development was pursued under several phases, it is often overlooked that at its core, it is an instance where, through pursuing a series of long-range plans, a city was planned and constructed in a decentralised context. As it created an administrative centre, it did so through decentering that administration from existing urban centres in Melbourne and Sydney.

Despite being frequently maligned, and even taking into account the possibilities for improvement, Canberra is a significant success of decentralisation policy. Canberra’s decentralisation success has occurred in spite of successive policy approaches; it has adapted to drastic transformations in formal planning approaches. Undoubtedly, carrying the significant immovable ballast of federal state governance has functioned to ensure the city’s persistence, limiting opportunity for the decentralisation of Canberra to be counterbalanced by “drift” back to Sydney or Melbourne. However, it is also important to note that viewing Canberra as a permanent and even an immovable urban structure in this way is a relatively recent historical development. As Nicholas Brown notes in his *History of Canberra*, “at the beginning of the 1920s Canberra had stalled to such an extent that, at this point more than any other, it might conceivably have been abandoned.”³⁷

³⁷ Nicholas Brown, *A History of Canberra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62.

That it has persisted and grown in spite of early administrative and logistical challenges speaks to **both** how the “success” of decentralisation is measured, and when the measurements are undertaken. While the initial impetus for a decentralised federal capital located outside Melbourne and Sydney was driven by the negotiations between colonies leading up to federation, the process of choosing the site for the capital was a fraught one, and involved negotiating a range of competing claims and cases for sites such as Dalgety, Orange and Bombala, along with a site known as “Yass-Canberra” and “Canberra-Yass.” This was eventually formally designated as the site for the capital in the 1908 Seat of Government Act. It took a further two and a half years for an international design competition for the capital to be announced in April 1911. The winning design by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin was selected in 1912, and was characterised by a medium density, low rise urban form expressed through a geometric layout of boulevard-style roads. While the design was considered sufficiently desirable to win the design competition, its enactment proved contentious, with years of delays to construction drawn out by local administrators objecting to various aspects of the plan, the methods of construction. Significant initial concessions were made to the city’s plan, including adopting a lower density, and removing proposed tramlines (which, in 2018, have been reinstated, as Canberra’s light rail system has finally opened.) World War One placed further economic pressures on the federal government and its investment in massive infrastructural projects of this nature, but perhaps more significantly, it pulled political focus away from the project. Griffin’s formal relationship with the Canberra plan was ended in 1920, by which time little construction beyond early works on the major road layout had taken place. This was sufficient, however, for the “central geometry” of Griffin’s plan to have “almost resolutely imprinted itself on the landscape” according to Brown; with this basic template for further development functioning as an underlying structure, subsequent reinvigoration of Canberra’s construction was nonetheless shaped by the Griffin layout, which proved “adaptable to change without loss of its essential characteristics.”³⁸

The persistent influence of the distinctive geometric road layout of the Griffins’ plan was such that even after John Sulman took charge of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, and reinterpreted many key aspects of the plan’s form, that Canberra’s overall shape was largely as Griffin had intended, even though its density and aesthetic differed significantly in places. Sulman’s reinterpretation of Griffin’s plan has been widely considered to have shifted Canberra closer to the British garden city tradition in spirit, and to have diluted some of the monumentalist aspects of the Griffin plan in favour of a more suburban aesthetic.³⁹ This was compounded by the modes of expansion of Canberra pursued under what has become known as the Y Plan. The Y plan, as implied by the name, expanded Canberra’s boundaries through adding linear networks of neighbourhoods, structured as discrete suburbs, in a Y-shaped formation with each spoke radiating outwards from central Canberra.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Y plan can be considered a further decentralisation of Canberra’s structure, by encouraging the redistribution of its population through suburbanisation and lower density construction dispersed from the urban centre. While heavily car-focused, the plan was also heavily focused on incorporating green spaces; the low density of the Y Plan can be seen as a pursuit of a more expansive overall urban space, but through incorporating more parkland, agricultural land and flexible land use within the urban boundaries. It consolidated earlier trends proposed by Sulman in diverging from the original Griffin plan, by further emphasising detached housing, de-emphasising hard public transport infrastructure, and by tending towards a more expansive use of land and space.

While Canberra’s form is often criticised in Australian media and popular culture, a significant proportion of these criticisms focus on the absolute fact of the town having been planned, and therefore being less “authentic” than, by implication, cities which were not pre-emptively planned out, and therefore possess some sort of authenticity.⁴¹ Much of the evidence marshalled in support of these claims, however, focuses on the specific aspects of the town’s form which derive from

³⁸ Peter Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect* (Canberra: NLA, 1995); Brown, *A History of Canberra*, 61.

³⁹ *A History of Canberra*, 64-70.

⁴⁰ Robert Freestone, “Shaping ‘the Finest City Region in the World’: Gordon Stephenson and Canberra’s National Capital Development Commission 1960-73,” *Town Planning Review* 83, no. 3 (2012); Stephen Hamnett and Robert Freestone, *Planning Metropolitan Australia, Planning, History and Environment Series* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴¹ Freestone, “Shaping ‘the Finest City Region in the World’: Gordon Stephenson and Canberra’s National Capital Development Commission 1960-73.”

Sulman's interpretation of the Griffin plan, or the expansions of the Y plan era, rather than the original plan or its "essential characteristics" in terms of the central urban layout.⁴² In this sense, many of the criticisms of Canberra's planning and aesthetic, while frequently referring to the fact of the town's planned origins, in fact refer to the specific divergences from the original plan pursued by subsequent redevelopments and expansions. For all the criticism of the divergences wrought by these phases of renewed construction of Canberra, these were significant in that they took the city from a partly completed to a completed form.

Canberra as a case study of decentralisation expresses political centralisation, and modernist planning practice. Canberra is also, however, a significant example of the impact of a lack of long-range systematic oversight on decentralised city building. The debates and disagreements regarding the implementations of the winning Griffin plan, and the slow implementation of even diluted aspects of its formal projections, created administrative impasses which were difficult for subsequent planners to intervene upon. The tensions and delays which beset the initial phase of the Griffin-era plan, and persisted into subsequent decades, enshrined a degree of inertia into the processes of developing Canberra's form, which the targeted interventions of Sulman and Stephenson can be seen as attempting to transcend. It is therefore important not to purely reject or dismiss the Sulman-era or Y-Plan era adaptations of Canberra's plan as aberrations; in many ways they imparted best practice policies of their era, and can be seen as attempts to update and reinvigorate an under-developed and under-executed urban experiment by updating it to meet a contemporary context. In this sense, these two phases of reimagining and retooling Canberra's shape fit within broader practices of urban planning as updating forms to fit new bodies of professional knowledge, and new fashions and trends in practice. The issue of lack of momentum in the crucial early phases therefore left open possibilities for drastic reinterpretations and phased redevelopments which have become contentious, and yet it is by virtue of these efforts that Canberra was able to persist at all, albeit in different forms than initially imagined.

The fact that Canberra did so, however, should not be interpreted as an inevitability; there is a growing field of research into the planning history of decentralisations projects in Australia which did not persist beyond these initial factors of inertia, disagreement, funding challenges, and conflicting vision. Many of the examples quoted are more recent planning experiments; the abandoned Whitlam-era project of Monarto, or the new town planned for the site of Murray Bridge in South Australia, which was abandoned after considerable investment into planning and development had taken place.⁴³ They also include studies into other "ghost cities", as Julian Bolleter terms them, including projects seeking to reimagine "waste" or "under-utilised" land in northern and central Australia.⁴⁴ Recent research into decentralisation targeting northern Australian states, and the desire to effectively capitalise on land seen as under-used or unevenly developed, is also making a significant contribution to understanding how Australian decentralisation projects have failed to produce significant, long-term and resilient solutions. These cases will be discussed below in their historical context more fully. In so doing, they illustrate Australian precedents where the circumstances which helped perpetuate the survival of Canberra as an infrastructural project were not in place, and which failed to lead to the material construction of the new city projects.

Canberra's adaptive persistence is not inevitable, but its distinguishing factor as a project associated with the governance of the nation was too big and too significant that it should be allowed to fail. While the persistence of Canberra through divergent styles of planning and administrative governance, and the resilience of the initial plan, should be considered successes in their sense of creating a resilient and functional urban space which has retained its decentralised population and governance structures, it should not be assumed that such a level of persistence is integral to any decentralisation project. Canberra, when measured against other planning experiments which did not evolve beyond early stalemates, conflicts and tensions, can be seen more as an exception than a rule.

⁴² Harrison, Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect, 30, 49; Brown, A History of Canberra, 61.

⁴³ Paul Walker, Jane Grant, and David Nichols, "Monarto's Contested Landscape," 16, no. 1 (2015).

⁴⁴ Sue Jackson, Libby Porter, and Louise C. Johnson, Planning in Indigenous Australia : From Imperial Foundations to Postcolonial Futures, The Rtpi Library Series (New York: Routledge, 2017); Julian Bolleter, The Ghost Cities of Australia : A Survey of New City Proposals and Their Lessons for Australia's 21st Century Development (Springer, 2018); Lyndon Megarrity, Northern Dreams : The Politics of Northern Development in Australia.

4.2 British post-1945 reconstructionist planning

Before considering further Australian historical examples of decentralisation policy, it is important to examine one of the most extensive global precedents for systematic decentralisation policy, which would heavily influence subsequent planning internationally. In contrast to Canberra as a single city constructed for a specific governance purpose, broader regional redistributive policies involve the establishment of networks of cities, or new and expanded towns, such as in the garden city model of wheel-and-spoke decentralisation. In order to facilitate and support such developments, further integrated networks of policies regarding the economic, demographic and geographic distribution of population, industry, wealth, and governance structures are also needed as part of a broader programme to underpin spatial planning.

The British postwar urban planning system is an important example here, as it has functioned as an “ideal type” for urban decentralisation. This is partly due to its wide scale and systematic scope, and partly due to the strong influence of Anglo-American experimentation with urban form on the development of the discipline of urban planning globally.

Postwar British new town planning has a politicised legacy, and its purported “failures” are often understood to be as self-evident as the simple “failure” of the government systems which created them.⁴⁵ The questions of measuring “success” and “failure” are often articulated without reference to the specific criteria against which they are being measured. Moreover, the simple binary of success vs. failure tends to oversimplify the measurement and interpretation of decentralisation policy, and in the case of early or “Mark 1” new towns, the use of “failure” is often invoked to characterise the towns based on the purported failures of social planning and insufficiently diverse long-range economic planning which shaped the forms of the towns themselves.⁴⁶

This over-reductive framework is compounded by simplistic representations of British new town planning as a singular set of policies, universally adhering to a “tight” master planning style and brutalist modernist aesthetic. The categorisations of these towns as “failures” frequently presents this “failing” as an inherent, intrinsic quality of the town’s fabric, evident to all, and requiring no further explication or analysis, or even definition of what has failed.⁴⁷ This intrinsic rejection of new town planning consistently invokes an antipathy to the very idea of new towns, and the conflation of the problems faced by particular types of planned town with intrinsic failures of the idea of new town planning itself.

Given that Britain’s programme was one of the most extensive Western projects of its kind, and one of the most thoroughly studied, the fact that it is so frequently understood as a “failure” has distinct wider implications for the way that decentralisation policies are understood, and the types of decentralisation which have been pursued subsequently. This is especially the case in the Australian context, where the history of the discipline of urban planning has been and continues to be shaped through the transfer and share of knowledge between metropole and ex-colony. British new town planning has long been a key feature of planning history as it is taught to professionals in university urban planning programmes, in Australia as well as internationally. For all its centrality to planning training, however, the critical reception of the British new town programme means that there can be a gulf between how new towns are understood in media and popular culture, and how they are understood by planning practitioners. Considering both of these aspects of British new town planning history is important in developing a well-rounded understanding not only of precedents in systemic spatial planning, but also of how they function in a wider political context, and how their formal elements can shape and contribute to wider political and social outcomes.

Rather than understanding new town planning as a self-contained policy capable of being assessed as having succeeded or failed in isolation, the Attlee government passed the New Towns Act 1946 as one part of their wider network of policies

⁴⁵ Colin Ward, *New Town, Home Town: The Lessons of Experience* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1993), 114.

⁴⁶ Peter Hall and Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities: The 21st-Century Reinvention of the Garden City*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 52-55.

⁴⁷ Terence Bendixson and John Platt, *Milton Keynes: Image and Reality* (Cambridge: Granta, 1992); Mark Clapson, *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

based on reconstructing Britain after the Second World War, understanding reconstruction in the broadest sense. After the First World War, there had been some understanding that a broad project of reconstruction should accompany the reconfiguration of social policies after the end of hostilities; R.H. Tawney was quoted as saying “Reconstruction is not so much a question of rebuilding society as it was before the war, but of moulding a better world out of the social and economic conditions which have come into being before the war.”⁴⁸ It was in this sense of re-construction, or constructing anew, which was a primary focus of the Attlee ministry, and its suite of policies constructing what has come to be known as “the welfare state” redefined the role of the British state in the lives of its citizens, with a distinct and deliberate focus on reimagining society as a whole, correcting social problems which existed before the war, and using the centralisation of power and resources which the fighting of World War II had necessitated in the services of building a new and better peacetime society.⁴⁹

This process had commenced during the war itself, with the Greater London Plan. Patrick Abercrombie’s Plan explicitly advocated for the decentralisation of London’s population as a means of improving the quality of and access to urban infrastructure and public housing, reducing urban overcrowding, and allowing for a pre-emptive preservation of green spaces.⁵⁰ The Plan specifically advocated for centralised government oversight of the construction of new towns on mainly greenfield sites, drastically expanding on the sites of existing villages, in the region around London. It also advocated for the use of a “green belt” around London: Abercrombie saw these as “girdles” of agricultural and parkland, including National Parks, whose planning permissions would be heavily regulated to maintain their “green” function. These had several purposes: to constrain London’s outward growth, to facilitate access to green space for leisure and health purposes, and to preserve the integrity of surrounding villages and land use patterns in the green belt area, including maintaining agricultural land. These would facilitate decentralisation by constraining the locations of urban growth, and allowing for a deliberate preservation of green agricultural and rural landscapes at the same time as pre-emptively constructing new purpose-built landscapes for urban-dwellers.

The recommendations of the GLP were widely taken up by the Attlee government after the war, with Britain’s New Towns Act 1946 was only one of many pieces of legislation which enacted these goals. The New Towns Act 1946 gave governments power to compulsorily acquire land, establish development corporations to plan, administer and construct towns on pre-determined sites. This twofold focus on reaction and active creation is fully demonstrated by Lewis Silkin, the Minister of Town and Country Planning, introducing the Second reading of the New Towns Act bill as follows:

“If the towns to be built under this Bill are new, neither the need for them, nor the idea, is in any sense new. My researches on new towns go back to the time of Sir Thomas More. He was the first person I have discovered to deplore the “suburban sprawl,” and in his “Utopia” there are 54 new towns, each 23 miles apart... I was referring to the past, and not to the future. It is a long cry from More’s “Utopia,” to the New Towns Bill, but it is not unreasonable to expect that that “Utopia” of 1515 should be translated into practical reality in 1946.”

Silkin’s sense of urgency was considerable: he explicitly said that this was the “last chance” to implement reforms to British cities before their forms became too unruly to be regulated. This sense of urgency was only matched by his sense of the potential scale of the programme:

“The new towns can be experiments in design as well as in living. They must be so laid out that there is ready access to the countryside for all. This combination of town and country is vital. Lack of it is perhaps the biggest curse of the present-day town dweller. I believe that if all these conditions are satisfied, we may well produce in the new towns a new type of citizen, a healthy, self-respecting, dignified person with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride. ... In the long run, the new towns will be judged by the kind of citizens they produce, by whether they create this spirit of

⁴⁸ Quoted in RH Tawney, ‘The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-1921,’ *Economic History Review* 13 nos 1-2 (1961) p. 10.

⁴⁹ David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London, England: Profile Books, 2006).

⁵⁰ Patrick Abercrombie, “Ministry of Town and Country Planning: Greater London Plan 1944,” (London: H.M.S.O., 1945).

friendship, neighbourliness and comradeship. That will be the real test, and that will be my objective so long as I have any responsibility for these new towns.”⁵¹

This grand-scale focus as articulated in Silkin’s speech must be understood in the context of 1946, where many British cities still lay in bomb sites, and where both the returning military population and the civilian population had incurred significant casualties and injuries both physical and psychological from an unprecedented “total war”.⁵² In this sense, Silkin’s sense of what was possible through urban design was not purely a formal demographic change, but a fundamental cultural shift, and one which would facilitate new and better forms of human inter-relationships. This future focus, however, was accompanied by a fairly singular sense of what was needed to correct the failings of earlier cities; this rationale has been described by Peter Hall as encapsulated in the Town and Country Planning act of 1947, where “no repeated learning process was involved, since the planner would get it right the first time.”⁵³

Britain’s postwar planning system can therefore be seen to combine elements of reactive policy-making with an explicitly proactive framework which even goes so far as to invoke Utopia as a goal. In this sense, it uses the rationale of reaction to justify not only a restoration of what went before, but as a foundation for an entirely new imagining of the nation’s demography and geography. This would be achieved via the power of the state. Population would be moved partly through utilising public housing lists; and partly through attracting major employers to new town sites. This legislation was undertaken with a twofold purpose; one, to react to the social and infrastructural problems faced by existing cities, both those which had been bombed during the war and those which had not; and two, to proactively seek to improve the quality of urban life.

The other policies which joined up with and reinforced those of the New Towns Act shared similar principles of reorganising society for the better through creating ideal forms and opportunities for new forms of community. The New Town programme was complemented by the powers of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which established greenbelts. It was also complemented by infrastructure policies targeting the reconstruction, densification, and infrastructural enrichment of existing cities and towns, including urban centres such as London and Birmingham, along with more substantial and literal re-construction of bombed-out cities such as Coventry and Plymouth.⁵⁴ Some of these policies involved “slum clearance”, or the wholesale demolition of large portions of inner cities mainly populated by working class people, primarily in public housing.⁵⁵

Much of this type of demolition and reconstruction was undertaken at the local or city council level, with support from Westminster which gave financial incentives to local authorities to build “high rise” tower blocks, although medium-density housing was also common (such as the award-winning terraced housing of the Camden Estate in North London, and more experimental forms such as ‘the Brunswick’).⁵⁶ These rebuilding schemes were administered in extremely paternalistic style, with no participation or consultation by residents, and where the final forms of the buildings themselves and their facilities entirely dictated by their architects in consultation with the requirements of the local council. The final forms of these “estates” were deliberately and drastically different from the forms which they replaced; their modernist aesthetics, use of inexpensive and efficient materials such as concrete, and their use of Brutalist-inspired formal elements such as elevated walkways, stark geometric and deliberately imposing design features, were necessarily highly visible

⁵¹ HC Deb 08 May 1946 vol 422 cc1072-1092.

⁵² Evan Mawdsley, *World War II: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government’s 21st Century Agenda*, Australian Histor (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

⁵³ Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design since 1880*, 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley; Blackwell, 2014), 390.

⁵⁴ Dennis Hardy, *From Garden Cities to New Towns: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning, 1899-1946* (London: Chapman and Hall, 2004), 133-43.

⁵⁵ Patrick Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945-1975: A Study of Corporate Power and Professional Influence in the Welfare State* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1981); Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁵⁶ Mark Swenarton, “Politics, Property and Planning: Building the Brunswick, 1958-1974,” *Town Planning Review* 84, no. 2 (2013).

additions to the landscapes of British cities.⁵⁷ The construction of these towers was frequently constrained by decisions to build cheaply, leading to problems with weathering, wiring, and gas supply; the latter causing the fatal explosion at Ronan Point in 1968. Compounding these issues with rushed or falsely-economical construction was that the plans and structures of these high rise and high density landscapes was necessarily inflexible and totalising, meaning that any omissions were less easily remedied by adding, expanding or removing key features.

Similarly undertaken primarily at the local council level was the construction of “overspill estates”; these involved city councils negotiating with regional towns who would construct new-build housing on their periphery for the purposes of housing residents from the city public housing lists.⁵⁸ In this regard, overspill estates held some similarities with new towns, however these were primarily peripheral residential estates “grafted” onto an already existing village or regional town, with the expectation that the economic and social infrastructure of that town would service its new expanded residential periphery. One notable example of a regional town which embraced this programme is Swindon, which expanded significantly under successive overspill arrangements with the Greater London Council, and was able to leverage this along with its position as a regional centre well-connected by rail in order to fund significant growth and develop its position as a regional “hub”, attracting a range of industries’ investments and relocations over the life of its overspill expansion, which it has largely maintained subsequently.

While the elite and governance drive behind new town planning and behind reinvigorating and reimagining society through new best practice knowledge was significant, there was consistently broader criticism of the ways in which these policies were enacted, and particularly their drastic and totalising changes to the existing landscape. Given the extent of the rhetoric used to argue in favour of the New Towns Bill, however understandable, the realities of planning and constructing new towns, and their effects on citizens, could be said to be necessarily lacking relative to these lofty initial goals. The two major interrelated critiques of early new towns particularly those centred in Hertfordshire, such as Stevenage, Hatfield, and Crawley, were firstly that they were planned too “tightly”, enacting fixed visions which limited their evolution over time; and secondly, that the focus was primarily placed on formal planning and economic planning, neglecting consideration of social and cultural factors.⁵⁹ The focus on using large-scale factory employers, as the major economic drivers of new town economies, such as at Hemel Hempstead which primarily functioned as a Kodak factory town, partly drove their tendency towards “monocultural” social and demographic mixes, with populations mainly consisting of “skilled” white working-class factory employees and their families, along with their middle-class managers and families. Compounding this stratified social mix was the limited planning of and provision of social facilities, “third places” such as pubs, parks, public squares, and so on; the primary planning foci were the workplace and the home in this model.⁶⁰ Where such resources were constructed, they were often delayed relative to the construction of housing and employment centres.

If “successful decentralisation” is measured narrowly in terms of long-term demographic and economic change, then the new town programs of the Mark 1 period must be considered as such; towns which did not exist were constructed, populated with people who moved from existing cities, and many of whom were employed within those new towns by employers who had also moved to those locations. These towns continued to exist, and continued to function; even where they have accumulated poor reputations in national culture more broadly, and even where they have met specific challenges in diversifying their economies, improving and diversifying their formal spatial plans, they cannot all simply be derided as intrinsically “failed” according to all possible metrics. This is even the case where these new towns have moved away from their economically self-sufficient intent and have become “commuter belt” cities in recent decades,

⁵⁷ Miles Glendinning, “Multifaceted Monolith: The Hidden Diversity of Mass Housing,” *Social Analysis* 54, no. 2 (2010).

⁵⁸ E.g. J.B. Cullingworth, “Social Implications of Overspill: The Worsley Social Survey,” *Sociological Review* 8, no. 1 (1960); Michael Harloe, *Swindon: A Town in Transition, a Study in Urban Development and Overspill Policy* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

⁵⁹ Robert Freestone, *Urban Planning in a Changing World: The Twentieth Century Experience*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 27-28.

⁶⁰ Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-War England* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 63-68.

which is particularly the case for those in the London area. Due to the use of green belt planning and regulation, the spatial integrity of these towns has been maintained with significant restrictions placed on sprawl, and the formal integrity of the towns as discrete entities continues to function as population decentralisation, even where the disproportionate economic might of London continued to overshadow its surrounding regions.

British cities and towns were drastically transformed in their appearance, organisation and functioning within the first two decades following the Second World War. The combined impact of the widespread adoption of new building techniques; the demolition and replacement of deteriorating housing with modernist high-rise tower blocks; visually prominent additions of motorways; and demographic transformations as people were unceremoniously moved out from cities, did not invoke the kind of response Silkin put forth about the potential for such planning to create better futures.⁶¹ Rather, the combined impact of these changes was felt profoundly and critiqued from a wide range of perspectives, including those who expressed anxiety about the symbolic and cultural impact of such widespread erasure of heritage landscape forms, those who interpreted postwar urban change as a cause of national cultural and economic problems, and those who objected to the nature of the change itself, whether in terms of its aesthetic products, or its social outcomes.⁶²

It can be seen from these historical case studies that far from being a simple model of new town planning, British postwar new towns functioned as a single aspect of a far wider system which evolved over time, which involved a range of mechanisms of population movement and industrial decentralisation, combining the establishment of Development Corporations at the national level with arrangements made between and by local authorities and councils to negotiate smaller-scale movements and changes. Despite there being two New Town Acts enshrining some specific legislation around the creation of new towns, these relied on much more substantial networks of policy to achieve their goals.

A primary lesson for considering what makes substantial population and industrial decentralisation possible, then, even if the formal outcomes are critiqued, can be seen to be the existence of a network of policies as part of a systematic programme. Effective “decentralisation policy” in this sense can be seen not as contained within any singular policy or piece of legislation, but as being an orientation and a goal pursued by a systematic approach, maintained over time, and enacted on multiple levels of government, from local to national.

4.3 Elizabeth, South Australia

As noted from the above examples, where the goal of decentralisation is as part of a systemic policy suite, any specific decentralisation policies necessarily require long-term policy planning as part of a broader suite of social and economic planning policies. A meaningful decentralisation policy, leading to long-term social outcomes and significant demographic shifts, necessarily must sit within a wider context of policies of densification, urban growth boundary regulation or “green belt” regulation, public housing construction, and “affordable” housing construction. Historically, “failures” of decentralisation in Australia, whether in terms of creating “ghost cities” or leading to the expansion of urban sprawl, have occurred through pursuing decentralisation either as an isolated policy, or on a short-term policy basis, without the long-term state investment and political oversight required.

While Australia’s physical urban form suffered proportionally less direct damage than Britain through conflict and attack during the Second World War, with the significant exception of Darwin, the notion of “postwar reconstruction” was one which was extremely influential in Australian wartime politics and persisted in shaping the culture beyond this. One of the primary decentralisation case studies in Australian history, the case study of Elizabeth new town in South Australia. Elizabeth is often understood as a simple “failure” of decentralisation, whereas it might be considered more accurately

⁶¹ *Suicide of a Nation? An Enquiry into the State of Britain Today*, (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

⁶² Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow; New York: Longman, 2000).

a failure to contextualise decentralisation attempts within the necessary network of supporting policies. Elizabeth was built around a singular manufacturing base and social class function; these might be considered failures to plan for economically and socially diverse outcomes, and failures to preserve the economic and spatial integrity of the new settlement from encroaching growth. Where these are considered as failures, they are specific aspects of the execution of decentralisation rather than inherent to or intrinsic to decentralisation itself. They replicate some of the shortcomings seen in the British examples which they were emulating, but they are not inherent to the decentralisation process or philosophy, so much as they are associated with a particular school of thought's approach to execution.

Adelaide's position in international planning history has been well established in planning history scholarship, with the formal layout of the town's parkland "green belt" by Colonel Light proving influential on subsequent ideals of hygienic, stately, and controllable urban layouts. The idea of bounding a city with a belt of parkland or regulated space onto which construction would not occur would become increasingly significant in late 19th century urban thinking, shaping the development of Howard's garden city ideal, and also influencing the form of Canberra's regulated green spaces. For all the significance of this aspect of Adelaide's form in terms of developing norms and typologies of "green belts", Adelaide's outward expansion beyond its parkland ring continued significantly throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and expanded particularly with the greater adoption of the car.⁶³ Given the role of Colonel Light's plan for Adelaide in the development of "green belt thinking" orthodoxy in the garden city school of urban planning practice, this failure can be seen as an irony, but it also indicates the pervasive broader settler-colonial logic that the spatial constraint of cities in Australia through applying hard peripheral boundaries is not necessary or desirable.⁶⁴

This aspect of Australian urban development has been thoroughly documented by historians but also by other scholars and theorists of settler colonialism, who have noted that the urge to expand urban boundaries outward in settler cities has been linked also to the desire to anchor the new settlement onto the land and maintain the displacement and exclusion of original residents.⁶⁵ Unlike, for example, in interwar Britain, where "ribbon development" or urban sprawl was interpreted as a threat to rural heritage and thus even to national identity, the outward geographical expansion of Australian cities has not been fundamentally treated as a threat to settler cultural heritage, nor has it been accompanied by a sense of scarcity or "loss" on the part of what such urban expansion might entail for the land onto which it expands. The absence of the perceived need to regulate the outward expansion of cities, and even to embrace this process of suburbanisation, fuelled the mid-century transformation of most of Australia's capital cities towards a fuller embrace of detached, low density, and expansive forms.

At the same time, however, the post-war context shaped South Australian attitudes towards decentralisation policy as part of forward thinking infrastructural planning, particularly regarding efficiency of service provision. Even where there was a perception that there was no shortage of land on which to settle, and that sprawl did not form the same kind of heritage threat as was perceived in the British example, by the 1940s, the South Australian government had become concerned about the cost efficiency of providing infrastructure and administering a sprawling urban form. As in the development of Canberra, the idea of Australia's landscape being an under-utilised resource which could and should be rendered more "efficient" has been an influencing factor in Australian planning since the commencement of colonisation, and South Australian state government shared a concern with the under-utilisation of their spatial resources and the overwhelming concentration of capital and population within Adelaide. The idea of new town planning, and particularly the British examples of "mark 1" new towns such as Hemel Hempstead which were heavily oriented towards manufacturing, were politically attractive in a context where the South Australian economy was not only seeking to shift demographic trends but also to divest some of the state's economic reliance on agriculture and cultivate a manufacturing basis.

⁶³ Graeme Davison and Sheryl Yelland, *Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004).

⁶⁴ Seamus O'Hanlon, *City Life : The New Urban Australia* (Sydney: New South, 2018).

⁶⁵ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006); Andrew J. May, *Melbourne Street Life*, 2nd ed. (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017).

Moreover, South Australia opted out of the 1945 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement on the provision of public housing, and instead, sought to utilise its own body, the South Australian Housing Trust, in order to construct a new town which would meet the specific needs of the state: creating a new site for industrial expansion, decentralising population and economy from Adelaide, and addressing a need for public housing by providing this on the basis of work. To this extent, Elizabeth was planned as a “factory” town to house workers, and to “improve” them by housing them in suburban-style aesthetics.⁶⁶ The issue of Elizabeth’s viability as a decentralisation project was necessarily tied to its economic and social viability, and to the extent to which it was formally supported as a detached and self-sufficient urban unit. In each of these areas, Elizabeth’s formal organisation and its economic (and therefore social) monoculturalism resembled the errors made by Mark 1 new town planners in 1950s British new towns, in that it heavily relied on the economic power of manufacturing, and a lack of diversity in terms of social class and industrial power.

In terms of social planning, Elizabeth also demonstrates similar preoccupations with the capacity of urban planning practice to transform its residents as that which Lewis Silkin demonstrated in his tabling of the 1946 New Town Act, though to a less explicitly utopian extent. Mark Peel’s 1992 paper on Elizabeth remains an important survey of the town’s history, and he suggests that Elizabeth reflected “a ‘bargain of expertise’ between planners and their clients... [where] the expert provision of the good city could be maintained and defended only so long as those clients, especially working class residents, could be seen to be improving their spatial and social behaviour to fit the new town’s expectations.”⁶⁷ By constructing a “good city” for working class residents, Peel argues, planners were expecting the forms of Elizabeth to engender socially stable, well ordered, and compliant communities, with little other support or infrastructural provision beyond housing and industrial employment expected to engender these outcomes.

Given that part of the purpose of the construction of Elizabeth was to expand South Australia’s industrial base, it necessarily as a town primarily relied on the single industrial sector of manufacturing. Its provision of public housing was tied to its provision of work; and the town’s economic viability was primarily supported through national policies of economic protectionism and tariffs which facilitated Australian manufacturing in general, and which in particular supported the industries centralised in Elizabeth.

While the Whitlam government is often associated with encouragement of decentralisation, it was specifically their abolition of tariffs protecting Australian manufacturing, and doing so without providing targeted support for the affected workers, which led to the drastic reversal in Elizabeth’s economic viability from which the town has not yet fully recovered.⁶⁸ The impact of the 1973 overnight 25% cuts to tariffs on manufacturing, intended to boost the competitiveness of the industry, necessarily presupposed that some would “lose” that competition without the protections which had been in place beforehand.⁶⁹ This impact on Australian manufacturing was wideranging, and affected Elizabeth’s economy drastically. This framework meant that when the collapse of Elizabeth’s industries, that there were limited alternative employment opportunities for the town’s residents, and little capacity for their social engagement to be understood or supported beyond their capacity as workers.

Moreover, while Elizabeth was established at a distance from Adelaide, it was also not sufficiently separated from Adelaide through green belts, and the outward expansion of Adelaide has caught up to and absorbed the town which is now officially a suburb, rather than a new centre in its own right. Elizabeth’s relationship to Adelaide was often described as being one of a “satellite” development, where it was understood as a derivative from the existing city rather than one with its own integral identity and function. The lack of formal differentiation between the two sites in terms of the lack of green belt provision and the failure to provide sufficient social, health and educational infrastructure to render Elizabeth self-sufficient. The combination of the lack of spatial regulation, and insufficient investment in and planning for self-sufficient socioeconomic integrity, meant that the survival of Elizabeth as a discrete urban space was never safeguarded in the same way as the British models of planning which it borrowed from.

⁶⁶ Mark Peel, *Planning the Good City in Australia: Elizabeth as a New Town* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1992), 4-8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁸ *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); O’Hanlon, *City Life : The New Urban Australia*.

⁶⁹ William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism* (London: SAGE, 2014).

In this sense, Elizabeth's inability to continue to function as an economically viable, discrete "new town" can be attributed to the lack of adequate supporting policies, and insufficient consideration of the role of economic and social diversity in creating sustainable cities. It also demonstrates the extent to which simply adopting an internationally developed model of "best practice", without critically examining its potential limitations, risks replicating the problems rather than the successes of such trends in planning thought.

These failures are not only not intrinsic to decentralisation policy, they are much more pervasive and systemic. The problems which beset Elizabeth are ones which were consistent with those affecting other outer urban areas in cities such as Melbourne, such as Broadmeadows, Altona, and Werribee, along in regional cities such as Geelong, whose economies have relied heavily on the manufacturing sector, and whose social class makeup reflected that industry concentration. Such areas are necessarily vulnerable to the economic fortunes of the industries to which they are so closely associated, and these same areas were heavily affected by the way in which the tariff cutback was implemented by the Whitlam government, and the deliberate lack of dovetailing of this policy with more socially protective ones. The deindustrialisation of these parts of the economy, combined with a fatalistic belief in this as serving a greater good of market logic, magnified the effect of these economic policies on these communities, without significant government

To this end, the transition from Fordist to post-Fordism, and the response of governments who saw the failure of "unproductive" sectors as a benefit to be celebrated without ameliorating its effects on the workers affected by it, is the main factor driving the failure of Elizabeth. Its planned forms exacerbated that, however, in this sense it was consistent with other areas in Australian cities; its vulnerabilities to particular forms of change are worthy of analysis, however they reflected a wider set of cultural beliefs about long boom growth, about the form of the Australian economy. To blame decentralisation policy in itself for global macroeconomic change, and for the effects of later national economic policies, is not only to misattribute causes, it enshrines a particular narrow version of the status quo by assuming that divergence from this is not only undesirable, but impossible. By proposing an inherent logic to decentralisation failure, policy options are constrained on historically inaccurate bases.

4.4 Milton Keynes, 1967

Problems such as those which beset Elizabeth, and which also affected the first phases of the postwar British planning projects, can be seen as arising from their definition of the form and goals of decentralisation policy. In particular, they arose from the process of defining decentralisation goals extremely narrowly, in terms of positing a singular, absolute and fixed vision of what "success" might look like, and in terms of creating an inflexible, heavily determined spatial plan and economic foundation. This narrow definition and focus made such planning experiments more vulnerable to social and economic change as there was no anticipation of change being a necessary or desirable trend to anticipate, and such capacity was not deliberately factored into the planning process. This was the case even in the more integrated policy of British example, where planning new towns was undertaken as part of a broader social project; even the systemic support of a wider policy network, which Elizabeth lacked as a case study, was not sufficient to ameliorate some of the evolutionary difficulties early new towns experienced, nor was it sufficient to preclude negative social and media reputations nor political critiques arising around new town planning.

These problems, however, were ones which planners and policy-makers were aware of, and sought to learn from in later projects. For this reason it is important to avoid the common tendency in critiques of postwar reconstructionist urban planning to present examples such as early British new towns, or Elizabeth in Australia, as representative of all decentralisation policy. Conventional political narratives of Britain's new town programme tend to emphasise the entire programme as a singular and consistent one; this was not the case, and most significantly, the final additions to Britain's new town programme deliberately and explicitly rejected the framework pursued in earlier iterations. Harold Wilson's Labour government had been elected in 1964 under an explicitly technocratic and future-focused policy basis, seeking to reinvigorate the connection between government policy and technological expertise to encourage and improve the

nation's development.⁷⁰ A Second New Towns Act was passed by this government in 1965, and as might be suggested by the inauguration of a second Act, the new towns which were designated under its powers were explicitly developed to drastically differ from previous attempts, both in terms of form, and their goals and administration.

Given that the towns designated under this Act, also known as "Mark 3" new towns, differed so drastically from earlier models, and so thoroughly sought to "learn from" and improve upon the mistakes and omissions of previous models, that they are often conflated with the rest of the programme is to risk overlooking their substantial contributions to the history of urban decentralisation programmes, and is to overlook potentially rich case studies for urban planning policies, models and approaches.⁷¹

This report therefore proposes considering the "mark 3" British new towns, and especially the new town of Milton Keynes as a case study with deep relevance for Australian urban planning and for Victorian planning specifically. Many policy critiques of postwar reconstructionist-era urban planning in particular, or of decentralisation in general, make the inaccurate claim that all towns constructed in this manner suffer from the same inherent problems, and are unable to adapt or change to evolve beyond them. Milton Keynes, however, demonstrates the utility of approaching planning policy not only to accommodate change, but with the goal of actively pursuing a flexible non-deterministic formal and social design as part of a wider programme of policies which foster community engagement and dynamic social outcomes. Moreover, Milton Keynes

While Milton Keynes was not able to transcend media and popular cultural criticisms in Britain and more broadly, these critiques have primarily responded more to a symbolic ideal of Milton Keynes, such as the ideals of other cities described in the introduction; they have also often simply reflected an intractable opposition to the idea of new landscape forms as having any capacity to create value, and an antipathy to new places themselves. To reject the idea that new landscape forms can create value, however, is to reject the principle of social change, growth and development in itself; and therefore a more nuanced and considered engagement with what types of change might be pursued, and for the benefit of whom, would facilitate a more realistic and grounded approach to policy development than a wholesale rejection of newness in itself.

The most experimental new town designated under the 1965 Act is perhaps one of the most promising and useful models of decentralisation policy and planning in the British new town programme, and yet has been one of the most maligned in popular culture. Milton Keynes' popular cultural and media representations in Britain are consistently critical, and frequently satirical, focused on deriding the town as sterile, soulless, and undesirable. Yet, the experience of residents of Milton Keynes has consistently been at odds with this broader representation, and indeed, the town's development corporations and council have consistently leveraged this gap between "image and reality" through advertising campaigns which seek to draw residents to "see for themselves" what the town is actually like.⁷² The 50th anniversary of the town's designation in 2017, occasioned year-long community celebrations, festivals, exhibitions and events which were widely supported by the town's residents, even where they occasioned somewhat bemused coverage in national media.

Milton Keynes was designated in 1967, and its Plan was published in 1970. Its Plan deliberately and explicitly rejected the forms and methods of previous new town planning in Britain and sought to create a new participatory, flexible model which would allow residents to shape their new community, and which would grow and adapt with time.⁷³ This was to be achieved through creating an urban plan which was itself decentralised, allowing residents from throughout the town to have equal levels of access to a range of shopping, employment, educational, and leisure facilities, by locating a

⁷⁰ Harold Wilson, *The New Britain: Labour's Plan Outlined* by Harold Wilson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

⁷¹ R. H. S. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. 1 (London: Hamilton, 1975), 147.

⁷² Lauren Pikó, "'You've Never Seen Anything Like It': Multiplexes, Shopping Malls and Sensory Overwhelm in Milton Keynes, 1979–1986," *The Senses and Society* 12, no. 2 (2017).

⁷³ *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, vol. 1 (Bletchley: Milton Keynes Development Corporation, 1970).

choice of these within five to fifteen minutes' walk from each residential area. The central goals of the town's plan were to facilitate "opportunity and freedom of choice" at every possible instance, for residents during the town's construction and development, and into the future.

This flexibility was to be facilitated through the formal organisation of the town itself. This was part of the motivation for Milton Keynes being constructed at a low-rise and lower density, with its initial population projection of 250,000 people to be spread over 22,000 acres of designated area. Not only would this provide more opportunity for gardens, parks, and green spaces throughout the town, it would also leave open the option for infill or re-use of land later, and function as a kind of "buffer" for future development. One of the central formal means which enshrined this low density and flexibility of land use is the town's loose network of grid roads, designed to direct through traffic away from residential areas and to maximise the efficiency of road transport. These roads were designed to be heavily planted with green verges, and combined with the design goal of building "no building taller than the tallest tree" to create a sense of driving through a rural, rather than an urban landscape. The formal structure of the grid and its low density structure has led the town to be somewhat unfairly been associated with being "Los Angeles in Buckinghamshire", or more broadly, a "car-centric" mode of urban planning.⁷⁴ It is important to note, however, that these same aspects of the town's plan which are "car friendly" are also by definition "bus friendly", and while bus transport provision in the town has consistently suffered through privatisation and constrained local authority budgets, the physical infrastructure of Milton Keynes is well equipped to support the flexible use of buses, which are used extensively and are an important part of its economy. The notion that because Milton Keynes' planners rejected the earlier model of "North Bucks New City" with a proposed fixed monorail system due to its expense and inflexibility, that the town is inherently unsuited to public transport is therefore misleading.⁷⁵

Moreover, the focus on car-friendly design is at least matched if not exceeded by a commitment to pedestrian design. Milton Keynes is also serviced by an extensive range of paths known as "the Redways" due to the colour of their pavement; these are mainly separated from major roads and cross these using underpasses. These paths have at some periods suffered from issues regarding maintenance and lighting, and the safety of these forms of separated pedestrian paths, particularly for women and particularly at night, has long been a concern. Conversely, the pedestrian underpasses in Milton Keynes have also become a relative refuge as well as a site of potential conflict. As is the case elsewhere in Britain, Milton Keynes has experienced escalating levels of homelessness in the years following the Global Financial Crisis and impact of subsequent government responses to it. These pedestrian underpasses, particularly in the centre of Milton Keynes, are widely used as shelters for rough sleeping.⁷⁶ As one critic of Milton Keynes put it, however, "would be wrong to expect [the town] to transcend the society which created it"⁷⁷ and while this part of the town's design has been the site where the impacts of under-provisioning of maintenance, policing, and other socio-economic trends have been rendered visible in the local landscape, it also continues to demonstrate a commitment to thoughtful state infrastructure provision and a willingness to experiment with and embrace the potential of new urban forms.

Along with flexibility and choice in design, Milton Keynes was planned on the principle of encouraging and facilitating active resident participation, feedback and monitoring programmes, which consistently sought resident opinions on the town's form, organisation, and administration, and published the results. These participatory frameworks were in turn supported by other means of community support subsidised by the Development Corporation, including funding and encouragement for local cable TV, radio, newspaper, community art and music programmes, many of which were taken up by local activists as a voice for local criticism of the town's administration and development.⁷⁸ Newly arriving residents

⁷⁴ "Los Angeles (Bucks.)," *Times*, March 18, 1970 1970.

⁷⁵ *The Best Laid Plans: Milton Keynes since 1997*, (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1997), 8-11; Guy Ortolano, "Planning the Urban Future in 1960s Britain," *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 02 (2011): 482.

⁷⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/22/at-least-320000-homeless-people-in-britain-says-shelter>

⁷⁷ Jeremy Seabrook, "Milton Keynes: A Mirror of England," *Observer Magazine*, 5 February 1978 1978, 22.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Leyh, *Concrete Sculpture in the Community* (London: Inter-Action Inprint, 1980); Jane Turner and Bob Jardine, *Pioneer Tales: A New Life in Milton Keynes* (Milton Keynes: The People's Press of Milton Keynes, 1985).

of public housing were encouraged to choose from available estates, and to redecorate and transform their new homes. They were supported by an arrivals team, which functioned as a transitional social work support network to integrate newly arrived residents to the town and to ensure they were supported in making connections to the community. The rationale for providing this level of flexibility was that it would allow Milton Keynes' planners to "get themselves out of a job" by empowering citizens to shape the community in the directions they saw fit, without being constrained by the planners themselves.⁷⁹ Lord Llewelyn-Davies, of the planning firm Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, promoted this aspect of the Plan in 1970 as follows:

Of course it's easy to look back at somebody's work 25 years ago and criticise it, but in planning of this sort it's futile to make guesses. You have to design a city with as much freedom and looseness of texture as possible. Don't tie people up in knots.⁸⁰

Economically, flexibility was encouraged through aggressive advertising to employers who were incentivised to move their businesses (and their employees) to Milton Keynes, with combinations of manufacturing, "hi tech", logistical and communications companies all being significant employers in the town. The range of large employers in diverse industries included the Open University, opened in Milton Keynes in 1968. Logistics and distribution networks have favoured Milton Keynes' ability to offer spacious facilities and connection to major road and transit networks, with Amazon UK's major distribution warehouse currently housed in Milton Keynes, along with those of manufacturers such as Subaru. The Shopping Buuilding which was opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 created over 3000 retail and logistics jobs during an economic downturn, and its unique architecture helped fuel its popularity as a regional economic drawcard, which the town built on through becoming home to Britain's first multiplex cinema at the Point in 1985, and expanding into other novel leisure and sporting facilities such as the indoor ice rink at Xscape which opened in [XX – double check].⁸¹ Economic diversity was planned from the outset with a goal of 50% rental and 50% owner-occupied housing, although the earlier build areas of the town were weighted more heavily towards public housing and rental construction.

London's continued population growth during the period between 1945-1975 partly incorporated immigration, but also significant "natural" reproductive growth during the "baby boom." Even despite London's continued population growth during this period, it would be to misread the purpose and intent of British planning policy to assume that this meant that population of all forms would take place entirely within new towns and other forms of decentralisation such as "overspill" estates constructed on the periphery of small regional towns. The purpose of these policies, rather, was to exercise purposeful direction over the shape and forms of growth, and to decentralise some of it into regions other than Greater London. Indeed, by the late 1970s, the efficacy of new towns at attracting population and economic investment was specifically singled out by politicians as a potential cause of "inner city decline".⁸² This local trend coincided with the global economic downturns following the Nixon Shocks and the OPEC oil crisis, culminating in the British currency crisis which necessitated a loan from the IMF in 1976. The idea that state overspending, including on new towns, had "drained" inner cities as well as the nation's finances, was widespread during this period, and new towns were significantly criticised for having a potential causal role in Britain's economic decline.⁸³ This in turn was widely understood as a moral issue, with Britain's declining empire and its declining economy broadly conflated with a wide range of postwar demographic and cultural changes, including urban change but also immigration and "permissive" liberalisation.

This wideranging cultural critique of a supposed "failure" of the postwar state which was dominant in the late 1970s was leveraged by the Thatcher government elected in 1979 as a means of justifying the "rolling back" of that state,

⁷⁹ "Milton Keynes: A Village City," (1973).

⁸⁰ "Instant City-1990," Illustrated London News, 1970 1970.

⁸¹ Janina Gosseye, "Milton Keynes' Centre: The Apotheosis of the British Post-War Consensus or the Apostle of Neo-Liberalism?," History of Retailing and Consumption 1, no. 3 (2015); Pikó, "'You've Never Seen Anything Like It'."

⁸² Otto Saumarez-Smith, "Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment in Britain, 1959-1966," The Historical Journal 58, no. 1 (2015); Otto Saumarez Smith, "The Inner City Crisis and the End of Urban Modernism in 1970s Britain," Twentieth Century British History (2016).

⁸³ "In Confidence: Cost Effectiveness of New Towns," (1976).

and public housing, state planning, and national infrastructure investments were crucial aspects of that.⁸⁴ High-profile public investments which were too far advanced to be cancelled, such as Milton Keynes, were highly visible symbols of a political and economic system which was not only no longer fashionable, but which were seen as causally implicated in national decline. For these reasons, Milton Keynes' negative representations in British politics, national print media and popular culture persisted throughout the 1980s and 1990s, even as the town took full advantage of its flexible organisation to embrace new industries, expand and adapt economically and administratively. This politicised reputation has persistently misrepresented key aspects of the town's plan, aesthetics, and functioning, such as the notion that its green low-density landscape is a "concrete jungle" and inherently deterministic in the same manner as other postwar urban-planned landscapes.

These conflations and inaccuracies have contributed to a limited use of Milton Keynes as a potential planning model, despite the distinctive innovations of its social planning in particular, and the way in which these elements have contributed towards a persistent local culture of participation and engagement. In 2016, for example, Milton Keynes Council put its new Neighbourhood Plan to a referendum, which had a 61% turnout amongst residential voters and 63.8% amongst businesses.⁸⁵ The year-long programme of celebrations for the town's 50th anniversary, even while many of these were necessarily funded and run by local councils and public bodies, were very well attended by and supported by the community, and speaks to the extent of local engagement with their town.

Formally, the town's flexible planning and attitude to leaving space and options has enabled the town to embrace technological advancements far earlier than many other British towns. The Plan for Milton Keynes in 1970 favoured planning for underground electrical and cable TV and phone lines partly on aesthetic grounds, to minimise visible TV aerials and pylons, but also as part of a broader programme of attempting to support a range of future communications needs for the town.⁸⁶ The Plan described that "The Corporation hope ... that other new technologies will be developed to serve the new city and will encourage all experiments in the provision of engineering services that might lead to a more efficient and convenient city."⁸⁷ Milton Keynes' terrain is largely clay, and taking this into account, the Plan proposed that underground cabling trenches be dug with a view towards not only current provision needs, but potential additions in future, with access via grass reservations adjacent to grid roads to maintain flexible access.⁸⁸ The commitment to embracing high-quality communications infrastructure and committing to continual updating of these facilities was a central feature of MKDC appeals to business, and was largely successful in attracting business on this front.⁸⁹ This culture of commitment to updating infrastructure, and the strategic planning towards flexible future needs, continues to serve Milton Keynes well; the town has been consistently at the forefront of updated broadband and fibre optical technology, and in September 2018 the town was announced as a partner with Cityfibre as one of the first UK cities to access "gigafast" 900mbit/second broadband.⁹⁰ The physical planning of Milton Keynes can be seen to have not only anticipated that infrastructural needs would change, but to have deliberately sought to allow for such change to occur and to accommodate it by creating flexible systems and building in physical space for a range of potential futures, rather than purely those which appear imminent at the time of planning.

Changing trends within the practice of urban planning have also been shaped by changing political cultures, and within this, those aspects of Milton Keynes' form which are most frequently criticised on aesthetic and political grounds in British culture also run counter to current definitions of "good" planning practice. In particular, these include the perception of

⁸⁴ Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture: Imagining England*.

⁸⁵ <http://voteyescmk.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Residential-Referendum-declaration.pdf>

⁸⁶ *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁸ Clapson in David C. Goodman and Colin Chant, *European Cities & Technology: Industrial to Post-Industrial City* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 297-99.

⁸⁹ Chapters 6 and 8, Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture: Imagining England*.

⁹⁰ https://www.theregister.co.uk/2018/09/12/milton_keynes_gigafast_broadband/

lower-density construction as inherently economically wasteful and “unwalkable”, and the association of a lack of hard-rail infrastructure for public transport as inherently meaning that a town must be transit-unfriendly. Much as the University of Bristol found in its 1986 study of Milton Keynes, however, “visiting architects and planners who come [to Milton Keynes] with a preconceived idea of what clues and landmarks a ‘city’ should offer... are confused when such clues are not yet apparent.”⁹¹ Where a planned town is attempting to present a new model of urban morphology, interpreting the lack of “clues” towards conventional organisation as a “failure” to adhere to them is to misread the intention, and potentially to overlook the specific nature of the outcomes being presented.

This is not to say that Milton Keynes demonstrates all the ways in which earlier phases of British new town planning could be “learned from”, nor that it itself does not demonstrate opportunities for further improvement. It is, however, to note that as a model, Milton Keynes not only demonstrates a model of specific aspects of formal, economic, and social planning which might be directly transferred to other contexts, but that the spirit with which Milton Keynes was planned is one worthy of consideration. This is not a spirit of experimentation based on a fixed vision of exhibition, but a process-based future-focused model which rejects canonicity as a value principle while seeking to actively be shaped by processes of change.

This approach diverges significantly from many contemporary “eco-city” and “smart city” experiments, which for all their desire to embrace technological advancements, pursue a fixed vision as they do so.⁹² To this end, they operate as showcases for their particular singular fixed visions, in a similar manner to that which Hall ascribed to the 1947 T&CP Act. In this mode of planning, the problems of existing cities stem from their failure to incorporate a specific, finite body of new best practice knowledge possessed by planners, and once this defined body of knowledge is imparted, “no repeated learning process [is] involved, since the planner would get it right the first time”.⁹³ This partly speaks to their goals and purpose, to demonstrate a visible formal and economic experiment on a global stage, rather than to function as locally-oriented experiments in genuinely diverse and socially sustainable living for their current and potential residents.⁹⁴ This construction of a city as an exhibition creates a particular optics of display in the present which limits the capacity for evolution.

As well as functioning as an experiment in itself, Milton Keynes was home to several smaller time-delimited exhibitions in “ideal living”. One of the most substantial of these was Milton Keynes’ own “eco-city” precinct from 1986, which still stands today; its Energy World exhibition of homes in Shenley Church End included a range of novel architectural solutions to energy efficiency, including a curtain-walled glass house shaped like an Iron Age roundhouse.⁹⁵ This exhibition reflected the concerns and styles of its time; the energy-saving focus of this housing was mainly oriented towards fuel-saving efficiencies for homeowners, rather than being part of a broader ecological programme, and the designs themselves were one-off constructions by private companies and developers such as Bartlett’s, though MKDC organised and ran the “exhibition” events and promotions which displayed the homes to the public. The extensive publicity campaign MKDC ran in the national media led Margaret Thatcher to visit; she “loved it”, and impressed by the potential energy bill savings, said that she “wish[ed] I’d seen the houses at this Energy Park before buying my home at Dulwich.”⁹⁶ For all its distinctiveness, the exhibition site itself, however, has not remained a discrete exhibition site; far from being a case of “Frankenstein

⁹¹ Jeff Bishop, *Milton Keynes - the Best of Both Worlds? : Public and Professional Views of a New City* (Bristol: School for Advanced Urban Studies, University of Bristol, 1986).

⁹² Giuseppe Grossi and Daniela Pianezzi, “Smart Cities: Utopia or Neoliberal Ideology?,” *Cities* 69 (2017); Federico Cugurullo, “Exposing Smart Cities and Eco-Cities: Frankenstein Urbanism and the Sustainability Challenges of the Experimental City,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50, no. 1 (2018).

⁹³ Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*.

⁹⁴ Federico Caprotti, “Eco-Urbanism and the Eco-City, or, Denying the Right to the City?: Eco-Urbanism and the Eco-City,” *Antipode* 46, no. 5 (2014).

⁹⁵ *Milton Keynes Energy World: Official Guide*, (Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Development Corporation, 1986).

⁹⁶ ““I love Milton Keynes!”,” *Milton Keynes Gazette* October 2, 1986; “Mrs T turns on to city power!,” *Milton Keynes Herald Weekly* October 2, 1986.

urbanism", the Energy World site is now simply understood as part of the "grid square" suburb of Shenley Church End, and in terms of its urban function, appears much like any other part of Milton Keynes.⁹⁷ This is even as the energy consumption information from the homes themselves has been monitored and used as part of a number of projects intended to reduce energy consumption and develop new national standards, including the National Energy Foundation's BRE Domestic Energy Model.⁹⁸ As a site of experimentation within a town itself which was a larger experiment, it retains the unique architecture of some of its housing, but its infrastructure provision is cohesive within the rest of the town, within which it is one part of a heterogeneous whole.

This approach to experimentation operating in a process-based model, taking a long-range view of potential outcomes, is one which runs at odds with much urban experimentation which pursues goals of creating a singular fixed "experiment" with highly controlled, and potentially inflexible, formal and social outcomes. Perhaps most important in considering Milton Keynes as a model for planning is its lack of egotism and commitment to process in planning; for all its large scale, and willingness to critique earlier models of urban planning, its survival and adaptation through a hostile economic and political environment was specifically facilitated by its being planned to adapt, rather than to resist or withstand that change. In this sense it speaks to the power and potential utility of planning infrastructure that anticipates and embraces the potential further change, rather than purely being a reaction changes which are already occurring, and which seek to defend rather than to lean into future adaptation and change. Even while Milton Keynes' biggest "failure", such as it is, can be seen to be in its public relations rather than in its formal planning, given that its reputation has been deliberately politicised to close off the idea of massive state investment in infrastructure as a contemporary policy option, this trend in its cultural representation is one which was beyond the control of its planners, and which the town's administrators have consistently engaged with and sought to subvert using both evidence and good humour.⁹⁹

Considered from this perspective, far from being a singular historical model of top-down, overly deterministic planning, postwar British new town planning can be seen as providing a more diverse range of models of how decentralisation can be pursued. The model of British new town planning, however, must be considered not purely in terms of any single town's planning, but rather as part of an entire policy landscape oriented towards particular goals, and which utilised interrelated systems at national, regional and local levels to pursue these. In particular, the spirit of seeking to actively transform and improve cities which Silkin presented as motivating the 1946 New Towns Act, for all its elevated prose, can be seen as reflecting a set of values which consistently drove policy regarding urban infrastructure during the period 1945 to 1973. This included the idea that existing urban models both could and should be improved upon; that doing so would create better social outcomes beyond narrowly defined economic gains such as profit or productivity; that not all good or desirable forms of urban space were already known, and that different ways of living should be pursued as part of seeking to improve the nation as a whole. Urban policymaking was not purely conceptualised of as a discrete discipline of "town planning," but as simply one part of a wider politics of a planned state.

Milton Keynes' future-focused model emerged from this system but also critiqued it. It drew on this wider network of policy "supports" that enabled it to model this level of flexibility, and added participatory structures at a local level, with a view towards creating a system of planning which was less hierarchical and which was shaped by users. This meant that while it provided a wide range of "top down" funding and infrastructure in a wide range of areas, it was able to provide this infrastructure in a way which residents themselves could direct. It also drew on a close relationship with academic research working alongside contemporary professional practice; indeed, in the early years of Milton Keynes' development these were interwoven, with planning theory and research, and experimentations in planning practice, each shaping each other within the development of the town's plan.

⁹⁷ Cugurullo, "Exposing Smart Cities and Eco-Cities."

⁹⁸ A. J. Summerfield et al., "Milton Keynes Energy Park Revisited: Changes in Internal Temperatures and Energy Usage," *Energy and Buildings* 39, no. 7 (2007).

⁹⁹ Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture: Imagining England*.

4.5 Decentralisation under the Whitlam government 1972-1975

The most prominent set of policies around decentralisation developed in Australia was that initiated by the Whitlam government during the period 1972-1975. In the Australian context, dismissive attitudes to decentralisation have been politically dominant in the years following the Whitlam government dismissal, where the “failures” of those policies have been widely understood as part of the intrinsic “failures” of that government and its policies. This narrative is necessarily limited, of course, by the realities of that government being removed and its policies either wound back or cancelled. Such narratives of the inherent failure of the Whitlam government have a specific function in that they maintain a status quo while precluding the reconsideration of a recent historical policy base which sought to transform that status quo through not only building “new towns” but the wider politics of “the Program” which intended to reimagine Australian civic life.¹⁰⁰ Precluding “decentralisation” in general as an inherently failed option therefore frequently relies on precluding the reconsideration of a singular interpretation of such a policy. Simplistically dismissing the urban policies of the Whitlam government also limits the extent to which they can be engaged with critically in detail.

The fate of Whitlam era policies is difficult to assess without considering the way in which they were implemented, and the wider context to which they were responding. Whitlam was elected during a period of global economic turmoil, following the Nixon shocks and in the leadup to the first OPEC oil crisis of 1973. The Keynesian foundations of global economic planning which had been established in the aftermath of the Second World War were in the process of unravelling, and this necessarily created a destabilised and shifting world economic context for implementing any wide ranging national policies of reform and nation building. Indeed, the global trend at this time was for reconstruction-type projects of nation building infrastructure to be being wound back, if not placed under moratorium or abolished, in response to the global economic instability. This includes in Britain, where Milton Keynes was only spared from being abandoned as a project due to the timing of its construction being too far advanced to be cancelled entirely; the town’s population goals, however, were wound back considerably.

Moreover, Whitlam’s policies required significant level of federal and state coordination, and for all the purported integrity of “the Program” as a cohesive policy base, the implementation of these policies was haphazard. The narrow electoral margin and delays in seats being declared during the 1972 election pushed back the establishment of Cabinet, however considerable drastic policy changes were implemented unilaterally by Whitlam prior to Cabinet convening, using executive powers in order to do so.¹⁰¹ Many of these policies were developed with the specific goal of urban transformation, reflecting a belief in cities as the defining characteristic of Australian life:

A citizen’s real standard of living, the health of himself and his family, his children’s opportunities for education and self-improvement, his access to employment opportunities, his ability to enjoy the nation’s resources for recreation or culture, his ability to participate in the decisions and actions of the community are determined not by his income, not by the hours he works, but by where he lives. This is why Labor believes that the national government must involve itself directly in cities. Practically every major national problem relates to cities. A national government which cuts itself off from responsibility for the nation’s cities is cutting itself off from the nation’s real life. A national government which has nothing to say about cities has nothing relevant or enduring to say about the nation or the nation’s future.¹⁰²

Whitlam’s interest in urbanity as a potential good, informed a number of policies, including inner-urban renewal and redevelopment initiatives, expanded provision of hard infrastructure including improved access to sewerage and water systems, and of social infrastructure such as libraries, leisure, and local community facilities in existing cities. This belief in a need for government to support and facilitate an improvement to civic life by encouraging more active and rounded

¹⁰⁰ Macintyre in *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government’s 21st Century Agenda*.

¹⁰¹ Macintyre in *ibid.*; Michelle Arrow and Angela Woollacott, “Introduction—How the Personal Became Political: The Gender and Sexuality Revolutions in 1970s Australia,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 33, no. 95 (2018).

¹⁰² 1972 election speech; <https://www.whitlam.org/whitlam-legacy-cities-and-suburbs/>

citizen engagement also shaped an interest in the development of new cities.¹⁰³

Whitlam's personal interest in urban issues, regional planning, and the state of Australian cities was well established during his time in opposition, and many of the issues which he developed in his Fabian Society pamphlet "An Urban Nation" would go on to shape the policies of his government after their election in 1972.¹⁰⁴ Far from being the sole driver of what Bolleter has called "decentralisation fever" in Australian politics during the early 1970s, Whitlam's personal interest reflected a wider culture of preoccupation with the functional capacity of Australian cities, partly fuelled by a belief that "they were expression for the overconcentration of Australia's population."¹⁰⁵

The Department of Urban and Regional Development was established in December 1972 with the goals of providing a new level of oversight to urban and spatial planning concerns, broadly construed in terms of social and infrastructural provision, as well as providing a mechanism to target development in growth areas, including through decentralisation. Their studies into potential urban "growth areas" in regional areas of Australia, lead to the selection of three sites for further development: Albury-Wodonga, on the border of New South Wales and Victoria; Bathurst-Orange, in New South Wales, and Monarto, in the Murray Bridge area of South Australia.

The plans for these "growth centres" combined a relatively greenfield approach at Monarto, with an approach closer to that of the "expanded cities" of the UK's "mark III" or "super" new towns in Bathurst-Orange and Albury-Wodonga. These latter two cities were intended to amalgamate and build upon the existing scaffolding of smaller developments within their designated areas, to create new, enlarged and integrated "growth centres" which would in turn act as potential hubs for the economies of their surrounding regions.¹⁰⁶

Albury-Wodonga was formally established as a new town site via the Albury-Wodonga development bill of 1973. The purpose of Albury-Wodonga, beyond the ideal of decentralisation itself, was not fully articulated prior to the town's designation, which meant that a range of economic bases were proposed afterwards

"Albury-Wodonga was proposed as a distribution center serving national and international markets, an international training and development center, an accommodation center in respect of tourism, boarding schools, health farms, and camps, and finally a center for selected agricultural and manufacturing activities (including building cars)."¹⁰⁷

Bathurst-Orange and Monarto were less successful to the extent that their plans did not materialise on the ground to even the limited extent seen at Albury-Wodonga. As Macintyre has noted, on his election, Whitlam felt some deal of complacency about their future electoral prospects, guessing that there would be at least "ten years" of consecutive Labour governments in which he could implement his policies.¹⁰⁸ The dismissal of the Whitlam government therefore marked a significant rupture in the kind of long-range planning which that government anticipated having scope to carry out, and it was followed by an explicit attempt by its successors to demonstrate "better" economic management.

Bolleter proposes that Albury-Wodonga was influenced by Milton Keynes, and suggests that the British new town movement "was regarded at the time to be a triumph of British planning."¹⁰⁹ This is true as a statement of the orthodoxy of the urban planning profession at this time, but does not consider the way in which that orthodoxy was disconnected from wider social trends, and particularly, a growing scepticism in Australia, the UK, and in the USA, of the types of centralised

¹⁰³ Arrow and Woollacott, "Introduction—How the Personal Became Political: The Gender and Sexuality Revolutions in 1970s Australia."

¹⁰⁴ Gough Whitlam, *An Urban Nation*, Victorian Fabian Society Pamphlet (Melbourne: Victorian Fabian Society, 1969).

¹⁰⁵ Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia : A Survey of New City Proposals and Their Lessons for Australia's 21st Century Development*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 40; Bruce Pennay, *Making a City in the Country : A History of the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre Project 1973-2003*, 1 vols. (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2005), 179.

¹⁰⁸ Macintyre in *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government's 21st Century Agenda*; *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia : A Survey of New City Proposals and Their Lessons for Australia's 21st Century Development*, 42.

“big state” projects which new town planning represented. It is this shifting orthodoxy which is crucial for understanding why the Whitlam government was dismissed, and for the ways in which the Fraser, Hawke and Keating governments subsequently sought to distance themselves from such large state infrastructural projects, and indeed, of such wide-scale integrated policy development, as the Whitlam government had proposed. To this end, the gap between the types of planning solution which Albury-Wodonga represented, and the popular “common senses” of economic orthodoxy regarding the role of big state investment and its supposed causal role in facilitating 1970s stagflation and recession, is a central factor in understanding why successive governments did not pursue the programmes which DURD had laid out.

With this considered, however, there are some important parallels to be drawn between the planning and policy principles underlying the DURD programme, and the example of Milton Keynes. Firstly, it is important to note that not only was urban planning practice and research in Australia well connected to British trends and norms during the 1970s, that far from solely drawing on Whitlam’s own (substantial) interest in urban studies, that his policy base known as “The Program” was developed with input from scholars and experts whose awareness of contemporary best practice in their fields of expertise shaped their policy proposals. The types of trends that Milton Keynes was representing, therefore, were ones which Australian policy-makers and planning practitioners were also aware of and drawing on. Secondly, Milton Keynes itself was a topic of interest in Australian planning, not only for its innovative Plan (copies of which were held by Australian university planning departments) but also for its representation of a revisionist, reimagining of planning itself, and the potential for a model of practice which defined its goals as a process, rather than as creating a fixed and final “product”.¹¹⁰ The broad future orientation of Whitlam era urban policy encouraged a flexibility, responsiveness and less fixed and deterministic mode of imagining the role of government in shaping long-range outcomes which would also be shaped by the communities themselves; the centralised governance which facilitated the planning process was therefore intended to be balanced by a focus on engendering local community participation in shaping the future of their new cities. In this sense, while both the DURD programmes and Milton Keynes reflected best practice trends in planning thought, they both also reflected the gap between planning thinking and wider political trends. Milton Keynes’ slightly earlier designation and construction allowed it to avoid full de-designation, ending up something like the traces of Monarto visible at the Murray Bridge site, and its flexibility in philosophy allowed it to bend towards the politics and economic approaches of subsequent governments, allowing it to survive albeit in a somewhat different form to its initial plan.

While the Bathurst “tri city” and Monarto are examples of proposed Whitlam new towns which did not eventuate, Albury-Wodonga cannot simply be dismissed as having “failed” in any singular absolute sense. While it has not been fully developed to the extent that was planned, it expanded considerably, and have retained that level of expansion. The ongoing influence of Albury-Wodonga as a site of an ATO branch and seat of Charles Sturt University has meant a significant rural white-collar or knowledge economic base has been integrated within the wider agricultural sector of that region. While Albury-Wodonga has experienced significant administrative and logistical challenges, including those from the constantly shifting policy bases and approaches by subsequent governments, some degree of the town’s expansion has been maintained and it has come to function as a significant regional centre for this reason. To some extent this can be seen in parallel to Canberra’s planning as a case study, where a resilient initial vision was sufficient to weather subsequent changes and evolution in policy, but it also speaks to the capacity of a flexible process-based approach to evolve to meet the needs of economic and political times which differed from those in which initial planning took place.

It is important not to overstate the foresight and integration of Whitlam-era policy, however; as has been noted in the case study of Elizabeth, the sudden and drastic cut to protectionist tariffs had a huge impact on the viability of industrially focused cities and regions which were not wholly offset by the increased supportive role of local government for its citizens.¹¹¹ Some of these issues might have been ameliorated if, as Whitlam had predicted, there had been successive

¹¹⁰ Australian Institute of Urban Studies Task Force on New Cities for Australia, First Report Subtitled Efficient and Humane Alternatives [Sic] to Overconcentrated Growth (Canberra: Australian Institute of Urban Studies, 1972).

¹¹¹ Jenny Hocking, Gough Whitlam : His Time : The Biography. Volume II (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2012). Arrow in Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government’s 21st Century Agenda.

terms of Labor government in order to address the impact of such sudden changes, however not only was this not to be the case, the effect of the dismissal was to delegitimise many of the policies which were seen to have facilitated the budget impasse of 1975, and subsequent governments sought to distance themselves from such wideranging social planning programmes. The cumulative effect of insufficient amelioration by Whitlam, and disinterest in the types of “nation building” which might have offset the issues which this caused for communities reliant on manufacturing, was to entrench a disconnect between the growing post-industrial economies of Australian cities, and those whose economic fortunes had been tied to the viability of a protected manufacturing sector.¹¹²

It was not until the 1990s that a significant project of urban infrastructure would be undertaken again, led by Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe. The Building Better Cities project was instigated in 1991, and was abolished by the incoming Howard government in 1995. The historical impact of the Better Cities program is an area in need of further research and analysis, however it is important to note that its goals were necessarily, and deliberately, constrained relative to the Whitlam era policies. Building Better Cities allocated a total of \$816.4 million to fund renewal projects in each state and territory of Australia, which was to be administered by the Federal government via intergovernmental agreements to execute agreed outcomes proposed in an “area strategy” which outlined goals for regenerating existing urban forms.¹¹³ The intent was “to promote improvements in the efficiency, equity and sustainability of Australian cities and to increase their capacity to meet a range of social, economic and environmental objectives.”¹¹⁴

While this framework has some parallels with the proposed urban renewal programmes under the DURD, it was explicitly framed as a small scale project, using limited funds strategically, to meet explicitly articulated goals in targeted selected urban areas. This is not to say that Better Cities projects were necessarily less successful, but that their goals were necessarily more conservative in their approach, with more targeted collaboration with states being pursued to develop sites with moderate goals, such as the establishment of mixed tenure housing projects, and brownfield site redevelopments. As the name implies, the programme primarily focused on reforming and improving existing cities rather than constructing new ones, primarily through projects of inner urban renewal addressing those former industrial areas which had been affected, in part, through the long-term impact of tariff abolition in 1973, and which had been further affected by the recessions and slow erosion of manufacturing during the 1980s.¹¹⁵

This forms part of a broader trend in the rhetorical framing of Hawke-Keating era Labor policy, that even where commonalities in approach with their predecessor can be seen, that there was also a careful attempt to present a more fiscally responsible, measured, and “safer” economic management style, ultimately meaning one which was perceived as less socialist and more business-friendly.¹¹⁶ Significantly, this excluded the kinds of decentralisation policy, and associated cost, which defined DURD’s legacy. As part of the BBC programme, however, there was a research-based report commissioned into decentralisation and social outcomes, which reflects an interest in considering the implications of decentralisation in a broader sense, and in considering the ways in which decentralisation policy might be used to foster positive social outcomes.¹¹⁷ Alongside the perceived economic and political imperatives for more moderate policy, Better Cities may also in part reflected a desire for more careful, research-based policy development, undertaken to minimise risk to urban residents as well as to the policy-makers developing it.

¹¹² Peel, *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty*; O’Hanlon, *City Life : The New Urban Australia*.

¹¹³ John Butcher, *Australia under Construction : Nation-Building Past, Present and Future* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ <https://insidestory.org.au/who-should-look-after-the-cities/>

¹¹⁶ Damien Cahill and Elizabeth Humphrys, “Rethinking the ‘Neoliberal Thought Collective’ Thesis,” *Globalisations* (2019).

¹¹⁷ Maryann Wulff, Joe Flood, and P. W. Newton, *Population Movement and Social Justice : An Exploration of Issues, Trends and Implications*, Report / Social Justice Research Program into Locational Disadvantage (Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service, 1993).

5. Discussion:

Prospects for Decentralisation in Victoria

This Section returns to Victoria and takes stock of the decentralisation project, firstly by re-examining the policy settings of recent decades, and then by reflecting upon them in the light of the case studies presented in the previous section, and presenting a discussion on the prospects for decentralisation in Victoria. Should Victoria decentralise, and what benefits would doing so bring?

Since the 1990s, Victoria's population has grown and with it, Melbourne's outward growth has accelerated, engulfing regional towns, hastening the development of commuter cities and commuter belts, and leapfrogging the urban growth boundary into more distant regional cities and towns. Successive Governments have seen the centralisation of jobs and resources around the Melbourne CBD, and growing costs of gridlocked, underserved suburbs and jobless regions. This is not an inevitability, but rather the cumulative effect of generations of incumbent policies and market forces coupled with planning regulation and governance determining and directing land use. Successive expansions of Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary indicate the power and pervasiveness of incumbent arrangements aligned to the suburban growth agenda. Thus, greenfield suburbs around Melbourne are planned, but in a largely reactive and developer-led way, and oriented towards specific industrial needs arising from the growth in freight and logistics, including warehousing of consumer goods. Satellite suburbs from Melton and Sunbury to Cranbourne have been absorbed. Despite rhetoric, centralisation has been only of passing interest in the State since the late 1960s and 1970s when plans for grand scale decentralisation and new cities declined.

5.1 Current planning context – Melbourne containment and mobilities

Since the 1990s migration (international and inter/intrastate) to Melbourne has taken place in the context of high overall growth – cities including Geelong and Ballarat have also been growing, but not to the scale of Melbourne. The expansion of Melbourne sees it absorb previously 'regional' areas, while post industrial centres continue in economic decline (La Trobe Valley, Shepparton).

Urban containment and consolidation policies in Melbourne have not prevented its growth and outward spread, as they have faced more powerful alignments of practice and policy settings that encourage centralisation and suburbanisation around Melbourne. Even the focus on activity centres within Melbourne have had limited success arising from limited regulatory teeth.¹¹⁸ Policy settings to encourage *investor led* intensification, on the other hand, have promoted the growth of parts of Melbourne to grow ever skywards since the turn of the century. This has not occurred without opposition. Intensification taps into broader Australian and international debates over links between urban density and sustainability. Loss of suburban character (voiced by groups such as Save Our Suburbs) has been a prominent issue, with opposition to higher density housing particularly in more affluent suburbs.¹¹⁹ What it rarely does is cause pause for thought about decentralisation, or the lack of it.

¹¹⁸ R. Goodman, & S. Moloney, "Activity centre planning in Melbourne revisited," *Australian Planner*, 41, 2 (2004): 47-54.

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Jean Taylor, "Do house values influence resistance to development?—A spatial analysis of planning objection and appeals in Melbourne." *Urban Policy and Research* 31, no. 1 (2013): 5-26; Margot Huxley, "'This suburb is of value to the whole of Melbourne': Save Our Suburbs and the struggle against inappropriate development." (2002).

Moreover, intensification has not led to urban consolidation through the prevention of further outwards suburbanisation.¹²⁰ This despite the fact that urban consolidation policies have been pursued in principle in most Australian cities since the early 1980s.¹²¹ The 1980 strategic plan for Melbourne explicitly stated urban consolidation (p. 1) and public participation (p. 4) goals.¹²² The right of local councils to use flat codes to prevent higher density housing was rescinded. Through the 1980s and 1990s further state level changes, including standardised planning tools introduced by the Victoria Planning Provisions (VPPs), meant local governments became comparatively restricted in their capacity to control housing locations and densities.

Yet, urban containment underpinned by transport, efficiency, liveability and design did not materialise¹²³ paralleling the experience of North American cities.¹²⁴ In short, this is because urban consolidation policies require a redistribution of the property rights embedded in suburban zoning controls, upsetting the status quo of existing homeowners, housing developers and landowners on the urban fringe.¹²⁵ With this in mind, unsurprisingly, Bunker et al. (2002) suggest that in Australia “the reaction and response of local government authorities and communities [to urban consolidation policies] has been mixed and increasingly hostile” (p. 143).¹²⁶

Another plank of the urban containment project in post-millennium Melbourne is the urban growth boundary. This was first enshrined in the 2002 metropolitan strategy ‘Melbourne 2030 – Planning for sustainable growth’, which followed a significant change in government. It also linked land use to transport, emphasising higher density housing near public transport ‘nodes’. This led to ‘A Plan for Melbourne’s Growth Areas’ in November 2005, with expansion of the urban growth boundary and the creation of the Growth Areas Authority. In December 2008, an “update” to Melbourne 2030 expanded the urban growth boundary further, with a further 50,000 hectares to be considered for inclusion. These successive expansions of the boundary indicate the power and pervasiveness of incumbent arrangements aligned to the suburban growth agenda.

The urban growth boundary in Melbourne now encompasses a large area of zoned land, and several regions which until some decades ago were considered regional (e.g. Wallan, Officer and Rockbank). This large scale development of housing occurs within a planning framework of Precinct Structure Plans. More recent policy (e.g. Plan Melbourne, 2014) aspires to 20-minute accessibility to key services, and “an integrated land use and transport strategy that will shape the economic future for Victoria”. Suburban development is overseen by the Victorian Planning Authority – mainly in terms of the basic layout of roads. The process remains otherwise developer-driven. The net result is a set of arrangements that broadly supports centralisation rather than regional disbursement of jobs and populations.

5.2 Prospects for decentralisation in Victoria

Land use planning in Victoria is characterised by disconnects: between urban consolidation and suburbanisation; between centralisation and decentralisation; between broader economic triggers and land use responses; between

¹²⁰ G. Searle, “The limits to urban consolidation,” *Australian planner*, 41, 1 (2004): 42-48; Judith Yates, “The rhetoric and reality of housing choice: the role of urban consolidation,” *Urban policy and research* 19, no. 4 (2001): 491-527.

¹²¹ Searle, “The limits to urban consolidation.”

¹²² *Metropolitan Strategy Implementation*, 1, 4.

¹²³ Searle, “The limits to urban consolidation,” Peter Newman, and Jeffrey Kenworthy. *Sustainability and cities: overcoming automobile dependence*. Island press, 1999.

¹²⁴ R. Goodman, M. Buxton, P. R. Chhetri, E. R. Taylor, & G. R. Wood, *Planning and the characteristics of housing supply in Melbourne*. Melbourne, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2010. Anthony Downs, *Still stuck in traffic: coping with peak-hour traffic congestion*. Brookings Institution Press, 2005; J Brian McLoughlin, *Shaping Melbourne’s future?: town planning, the state and civil society*. CUP Archive, 1992.

¹²⁵ J. Hurley, E. Taylor, & J. Dodson, “Getting Dense: Why has urban consolidation been so difficult?” *The Routledge handbook of Australian urban and regional planning*. London: Routledge (2017): 123-135.

¹²⁶ R. Bunker, B. Gleeson, D. Holloway, & B. Randolph, “The local impacts of urban consolidation in Sydney,” *Urban Policy and Research*, 20, 2 (2002): 143-167.

strategy and statutory mechanisms; and between growth and investment in infrastructure. In this complex landscape, investment is king; thus land use and development planning is reactive rather than proactive, and despite a long history of concern with decentralisation policy it is not a given that this should materialise or displace other priorities.

Significant decentralisation, or meaningful new settlements, in Victoria would require; a) land acquisition and coordination powers, and; b) coordination and bipartisan, long term commitments, and; c) prioritisation of investment in supporting infrastructure and services. These are functions of government that shaped earlier periods of settlement but which were subsequently dismantled and indeed have been variously rejected by some quarters as risking undermining the primacy and workings of the property market.

Tellingly, the Alpine village of Dinner Plain lays claim to being the most recent 'new' 'freehold' settlement in Victoria, built in 1986. Expansion of existing towns might be possible – through building out existing subdivisions; within township zoned areas. Otherwise, a 'new town' would require significant rezoning and be subject to requirements for subdivision. It would run counter to current established norms of strategic planning and legislation as to require political level support. New settlements aside, redevelopment or reinvestment in existing regional areas depends both on state (or occasionally federal) government decisions; and on the decisions of global firms. Proposals for change are mainly driven by regional town coalitions (Shepparton) or by private investors. The fates of differing tiers of regional settlements vary widely in these terms.

As indicated in Section 4, land acquisitions and corporations are a theme of executed new towns, from Milton Keynes to Elizabeth. Planning for decentralisation can take various forms but all involve state intervention in land consolidation and resale of land/development rights, and infrastructure sequencing at the state level. Moreover, in Victoria, land acquisition and assembly has characterised regional post-colonial settlement, whether Selector, Closer Settlement or Soldier Settlement, or the more recent Albury-Wodonga experiment, where the corporation acquired then sold serviced land.

Today, however, the delivery of serviced land in Victoria's growth areas is undertaken in large part by private land developers. Alternative approaches thus raise questions around the contemporary role of government, especially when state agencies are themselves already constrained in their budget capacity to plan for long-term infrastructure delivery in growth areas. Victoria currently has few if any direct roles in land assembly, and the PSP process is currently reactive rather than proactive. This would need to change if decentralisation is to be taken on seriously. In a broader sense this observation feeds into the question of the nature of change and of responsibility for it. Victoria's history shows how land and infrastructure based initiatives to periodically open up the regions have either been left to dwindle or have been purposefully dismantled. In contrast, centralisation, intensification and suburban expansion of Melbourne have been supported through sustained alignments of efforts, including public policy.

The case studies in Section 4 also provide several further learnings to inform prospective decentralisation in Victoria. Firstly, the case of Canberra illustrates that successful new cities *can* be established in Australia's hinterland, albeit under the specific circumstances and, arguably, advantages, of having the title of seat of Government. While this made Canberra a decentralisation story that was too big to fail, the case does illustrate not only the sorts of policy settings and commitment required, but also the timelines required, and some indications of the opposition that can be expected. Broad parallels can also be found in the story of Milton Keynes.

New towns are routinely criticised in popular culture. Largely unfounded criticism typically comes from two main quarters. First are incumbents in major cities who are tied to particular urban loyalties and narratives about how cities that are 'authentic' must be. This entrenched view exists despite the fact that these cities are new by world standards and have been reinvented and reworked several times already. Second are incumbents in surrounding country towns and villages, who are protective of their country ways (and privileges) and find any alternative way of living threatening to their own legitimacy. Modernizers face such opposition as a matter of course. Thus, new towns are at once criticized as sterile and boring, and yet at the same time imposing and threatening to rural dwellers' ways of life. They readily attract political opposition in prospect as politicians find it easier to come to the defence of incumbent voters in existing wards than to the vision and ideas that may one day host future voters. Such criticism can take on the form of durable narratives and stories

about places that bear little resemblance to reality, or at least do not reflect a true picture of reality; much as our popular narratives of Los Angeles and New York.

The UK's post-war new towns programme was founded on a modernist structural planning paradigm, which translated into fixed visions about decanted city citizens moving to commuter towns. The plan came with expectations of anchor employers and of what makes a good life and a good town. Flexibility was not always built in to these fixed visions. When realities did not match the plan, such as in Newtown, the project slowed and stalled. Elizabeth provides another example of the challenges of planning around key single industry anchor employers.

Milton Keynes provides an exception in that it grew rather slowly, but had built in flexibility, from easements in the central boulevards for as yet unknown future cabling, to a central carpark designed and built in such a way that it could be retrofitted for a post-car world into other higher value uses. A large and public focused, vocationally oriented and accessible University was also a boost for a city that became well connected via an upgraded train service to key centres including London.

5.3 Delivering decentralisation in Victoria

So, assuming that the political will and necessary institutional alignments can be marshalled, why, what, when and where might 21st century decentralisation in Victoria become a reality?

Firstly, rigid blueprints based on high density walkable orthodoxies may not be the best solution for decentralising efforts in Victoria. Instead a more open and porous, flexible mode of urban form is called for that proves adaptable to future shocks and disruption. This, combined with a focus on key assets; good quality, well located, affordable housing, and plenty of well-educated workers, together with key public funded assets and centres of employment, such as Universities and Hospitals. Soft infrastructure in the form of an engaged, heard and empowered community is also important. This can be harnessed to different opportunities and forms the basis for a resourceful and resilient city. Open dialogue and a flexible form provides routes to reconciliation, to engagement with nature and the environment, as well as to sustainable economic activity.

A more nuanced and considered engagement with what types of change might be pursued, and for the benefit of whom, would facilitate a more realistic and grounded approach to policy development than a wholesale rejection of newness in itself. While not presuming that policy can direct or control social and economic outcomes in place, recognising the (intentional or otherwise) role of past decisions in present outcomes is a way to develop a sense of responsibility for past, present and future communities.

This suggests a role for government that is coordinated and active, but also not focused narrowly on regulations or on immediate outcomes. To instigate long range commitment to settlement in Victoria would require questioning the assumed 'authenticity' argument around Melbourne and indeed existing settlements, and to interrogate assumed default or organic patterns of growth. Narratives that inaccurately normalise and essentialise the primacy of capital cities and "historic" regional cities take a passive view of centralisation and of the nature of social change or government action.

Sustaining the necessary policy and institutions over time points to a bipartisan platform and a successful economic model. The benefits are clear; human-scale living arrangements, with urban hub services, but minimal commuter times and unserviced suburbia. Several new urban hubs provides diversity that is good for liveability as well as economic performance, along the lines of much of western Europe. Places to start would be those where there is access to existing rail infrastructure, while the distance to Melbourne is comfortably leapfrogging green space i.e. 100-250km radius, not including the commute zones around existing regional centres. Given the timeframe over which Victoria's population is growing, and current building rates, it is prudent to plan for 20 year timeframes to establish sustainable new centres. This would allow for new cities of 100-400,000 people (40-150,000 dwellings) to be built, removing much of the congestion pressure from Melbourne, while also encouraging new industries to locate there, but also to supply innovative materials, building forms, designs, and mixed use models that address economic, social and environmental concerns.

6. Conclusions & recommendations

This report set out to advance the prospects for a formal decentralisation program for Victoria – based upon achieving planned new cities and disbursed growth to these new purpose built regional cities. In so doing, we have considered historical patterns, contemporary settings and case studies from elsewhere. Following below is a set of guiding principles about decentralisation:

1. Develop commitment to shaping the future for a liveable Victoria that provides urban choices.
2. Specify a lead a role for government in land, infrastructure and regulation. Government that is committed to a long term plan is essential to build a vision and new institutions.
3. Think beyond the popular imaginaries. Density and design blueprints wont be enough. However, they can set the tone and act as a beacon for new pioneers.
4. Design in an openness to diverse and unexpected futures.
5. Prepare for criticism – from incumbents and vested interests in cities and towns, and accommodate the complexities and diversity of opposition into the vision and response.
6. Good design gets us a long way, oriented around sustainability in terms of breadth of community and jobs, also in terms of water, energy and mobility.
7. Build community buy-in.
8. Set KPIs and measure and revise continuously.

Decentralisation should not be defined as a singular policy, but needs to be integrated into a wider, long term network of policies on affordable housing, accessible transport, high speed rail connections, and long-range economic planning. Push factors and pull factors need to be balanced, so centralisation is not opposed to decentralisation but instead congestion relief and protection of green belts are coherently pursued alongside new city building. Long-range planning is absolutely necessary to break the cycle of short-term strategic plans, while designing-in flexibility and the inevitable need for constant adaptation to macro and micro changes in circumstances. This in turn requires a shift in planning orthodoxy from one based on blueprints to a focus on flexible process, and provision of the enabling infrastructures of affordable housing, accessible transport, and long-range economic planning. Such physical and economic planning outcomes are inextricable from social ones, and social infrastructure is critical in providing autonomy and a vehicle for expression for a new community.

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