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The Secretary
Inquiry into: Infrastructure and
the Development of Australia's Region Areas
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I make this submission as an individual who is keenly interested in improvements in the level of regional development within Australia, and as someone who believes a rethink is required in the current approach toward urban development.

Many of my thoughts on the problems facing Australia, and the short-sighted urbanisation at the expense of regional development have been well-captured in an article written by Graeme O'Neill in his *Science Watch* column. The article is titled *Rural future on line*, and was published in the *Melbourne Sunday Herald Sun*, November 26, 1995, page 90. The article contains the views of Dr Joe Baker who at the time was (and may still be) living in Canberra as the Commissioner for the Environment. I recommend this article as worthwhile reading. To quote a portion:

"Dr Baker says that more than 80 per cent of Australians live within 100km of the coast, most in large cities that are already experiencing serious problems with traffic, air and water pollution, loss of productive agricultural land and social alienation.

Meanwhile, the drift to the cities from country towns continues unchecked, while governments fail to look beyond short-term economic perspectives, close rail links and fail to provide the transport and communication infrastructure that inland cities need."

I am certainly encouraged by the recent initiatives of the Government to work towards improving the situation facing not only regional Australia, but as a result, Australia as a whole. Whereas infrastructure is sometimes lacking, sometimes there is a further hurdle to regional development. Encouragement and initiative from Australia's key decision makers, be they within Government, the public sector, or the private arena is certainly necessary for the process to be fruitful.

In somewhat of a 'chicken and egg' scenario, infrastructure provision is often a necessary catalyst to generate growth, but it may similarly be a requirement to allow, or even cope with growth.

When it comes to the opportunity for the provision of employment regionally, certainly there are many instances where an organisation could quite as easily be located outside of the major cities. The acid test is:

Could this city-based organisation meet its function as well at similar or lesser cost if it were regionally located?

or perhaps

Could this city-based organisation meet its function as well or better at similar cost if it were regionally located?

Further, the need for many organisations to be based in the CBD¹ could be questioned, when in this day and age very few, if any, of their organisational functions call upon co-location with other organisations to enable day-to-day interaction.

An example of the application of common sense in this regard was the relocation of the NSW Department of Agriculture's Head Office from the Sydney CBD to Orange. Clearly the now regionally located staff can be much more in tune with their rural clients than would have been possible in downtown Sydney.

Unfortunately, for residents of many parts of Australia, by the very nature of Australia's development to date, the choice of locality is commonly restricted to a handful of capital cities, with country school-leavers and university graduates moving or drifting to those cities, often driven by necessity rather than desire.

The situation is significantly better in the United States, where there are many many choices of where to live within the nation, since there are cities of sufficient size spread right across the country, creating hubs of government and industry in all regions. A similar situation exists in Europe where population centres are more evenly distributed than in Australia, and numerous small to mid-sized regional cities exist.

With the trend toward urbanisation we are facing our two largest cities are shifting toward complexity overload², and others will follow. Sydney's water crisis and Victoria's gas fiasco are reminders of the fragility of aspects of our lives we take for granted, in an increasingly intricate society.

¹ If Melbourne's 'Grollo' tower ever proceeds, it might be appropriate that the developer joins the thousands of commuters that will be obligated to many hours per week of peak hour travel resulting from this further concentration of the CBD.

² An example of this is the current consideration to develop a 1km tunnel in Sydney at a cost of \$120M to alleviate traffic that travels across the city, but does so via the central city area, creating extraneous congestion. With surface routes, overpass routes, and subterranean routes becoming necessary to allow our major cities to function, solutions that will be workable for the longer term must become a priority.

Indeed the continued growth of Sydney³ and Melbourne, and the focus placed upon them by their respective State Governments at the expense of other regions within their states seems to place capital city pride and rivalry above development, maintenance and support of the total constituency.

As regional NSW recovers from concentration on the Sydney Olympics, it will then be Victoria's turn as spending shifts toward the development of the Melbourne Commonwealth Games, with a stated aim of being at least the equal of the Sydney Olympics, if not better.

Over recent years the emphasis on transport related infrastructure has been on the urban areas. Examples include:

- the Sydney Harbour Tunnel
- the Melbourne City-Link Project
- the proposed Sydney-Canberra High Speed Train
- the many urban freeway projects

The Bicentenary Project, where the Hume Highway was to be duplicated between Sydney and Melbourne is an example where the development of regional infrastructure somehow lost priority. Victoria did in fact complete its portion of the project, providing a duplicated freeway from Melbourne to Wodonga. However NSW's effort seems to have petered out in the regional 'no-mans-land' slightly south of Wagga, beyond which the Sydney media does not extend, and where cultural and sporting activities are of a Victorian nature, despite a NSW location.

Consequently, of the 600km of highway between Sydney and Albury, approximately 1/6th remains incomplete more than a decade beyond the proposed completion date. As we approach a new millennium, this is testimony of the inattention toward regional development – the upgrade of the major traffic route between Australia's two largest cities has virtually stalled, and one would suspect will run 20 years beyond its originally proposed completion time.

Discrepancies in fuel pricing are another issue facing regional areas. Capital city prices are almost always significantly lower than the prices in regional Australia, and whereas cartage costs are often cited as an excuse for price differentials, this does not hold up to simple investigation (as can be easily undertaken by sampling prices across the nation). Despite the efforts of the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, this situation seems to only be alterable through the application of political pressure (with the results generally being temporary as pressure abates) or through competition introduced by independent suppliers or the petrol-supplying supermarket chains, with a resultant lessening of pricing disparities.

Another transportation aspect of some concern to NSW regional areas, is the prospect that the level of access to Mascot Airport might be reduced due to the overcrowding problems faced there. The possibility that flights might instead terminate at the

³ Related to this growth is demand for real estate, creating upward pressure upon prices – a recent study placed Sydney as the fifth most expensive city in the world.

second Sydney Airport (wherever it might be) would create further impediments to satisfactory transport arrangements into Sydney.

Regional areas are currently flagging well behind the major urban areas in the capability of telecommunications services:

- access to alternative telecommunications service providers is limited
- the transmission coverage for mobile phones is deficient⁴
- the roll-out of services that might provide affordable high-bandwidth capability is slow in reaching the regions⁵

As communications costs trend toward a flatter time-based structure that is independent of distance, there remains a discontinuity in costing arrangements when it comes to untimed local calls. This disconnect in pricing approach disadvantages those subjected to timed calls over short distances, in comparison with those making local calls. Compared with large urban areas⁶, regional telephone users much more frequently need to make calls that are at a timed rate⁷. An approach toward the timing of all calls at cheaper rates, or a wider availability of local call rates would reduce this area of inequity.

Whereas all capital cities, and large numbers of regional dwellers are provided with four television stations, and more often than not, SBS also, there are still significant areas where that is not the case. For instance, Geraldton, Western Australia was recently celebrating the provision of a third television station – and this is in the second largest population centre of a state that comprises a third of Australia's land mass. The fact that something as fundamental the provision of the five free-to-air television stations is not yet a reality across regional Australia is further evidence of regional disregard.

⁴ The utility of a digital mobile approaches zero a mere 80km north of Perth, with vast areas unsupported. Even along the Hume Highway coverage is incomplete. In contrast, the services at major airports approach perfection.

⁵ This might include cable services, as are provided by Telstra and Optus, or alternatively other means of telecommunications that would provide equivalent or better price/performance.

⁶ For instance, within the Sydney area, a phone user can reach 4 million other telephone users for the fixed cost of a local call, regardless of the duration of the call.

⁷ The rate between two country towns that are more closely located than two suburbs within an urban sprawl can attract the same rate as applies between Sydney and Perth.

Communications infrastructure is perhaps the one form of infrastructure that can very readily provide an impetus toward development of the regions. Whereas large-scale manufacturing operations cannot relocate without major upheaval, suitable communications infrastructure readily permits numerous operations that could provide employment outside of major cities, perhaps in regional centres. Examples include:

- call centres⁸
- computer centres for large organisations⁹
- information-based industries
- broadcasting centres (eg. TV, radio)¹⁰

Regional development pertaining to tourism needs to be treated sensitively. Paradoxically, development of tourism in some regional areas conflicts with the very essence that makes these attractions unique within the world – the Wilderness of Tasmania, the Alpine High Plains, the pristine Whitsundays, the rugged Australian interior, the Barrier Reef.

Difficulties are faced with the health services provided within the regions. Aside from the provision of comprehensive facilities, the shortage of medical specialists¹¹ and practitioners in rural areas is well documented.

The urban concentration within Australia poses additional vulnerability. Australia's national security would be better served with a more evenly distributed population – this aspect being well recognised by Defence and Government in the development of Darwin's infrastructure and the emphasis on northern Defence establishments. Certainly the ease with which 'boat people' have been able to enter Australia's largely isolated coastline is a further concern, as evidenced by the two such instances in the past week.

Regional areas near state borders are impacted in other ways. Many aspects result from regulations and policies of State Government departments. These departments are always not aware of these difficulties, as they are well removed from issues faced at the extremities of their states. Since these issues impact upon only a portion of the

⁸ Already one major car rental company runs its call centre as a worldwide operation out of the USA. Whilst having such a service go off-shore is not particularly desirable, it provides clear evidence of the opportunities arising from virtual geographic independence (along with the threats).

⁹ The National Australia Bank's computing centre resides in the outer Eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Clearly this hub of nationwide information processing could have been located anywhere within Australia, providing infrastructure needs were met.

¹⁰ Television and radio presentations originate from all over the globe. In practice, Radio JJJ regularly conducts broadcasts from locations across Australia.

¹¹ Figures sourced from the Australian Medical Publishing Company by the Melbourne Herald Sun cited 1549 specialists working in the metropolitan area with only 186 in country Victoria.

regional areas and are not necessarily directly linked to infrastructure, their mention will be brief – some examples follow:

- problems with the provision of numerous cross-border services, including health services, emergency services
- differing regulatory requirements
- requirements for duplicate licensing, eg. trade licences, real estate licences, etc.
- differing state traffic regulations, though improvement and rationalisation is being undertaken
- road signage problems along borders, extending to inconsistencies in road services, and reticence in suitably bridging streams for interstate routes
- time zone-differences

There are undoubtedly many cases where infrastructure developments would provide benefit to the regional areas, in parts of Australia I am not particularly familiar with. I do however suggest some items for consideration:

- extension of the Sydney – Canberra High Speed Train link, providing a link that extends north to Brisbane, and later extends further, and south to Melbourne, incorporating a small number of regional cities along the route. One of those regional cities could become the administration, management and maintenance centre for the total service
- investigation into the status of the proposed feasibility study the Australian Inland Railway Expressway¹²
- continuation of the improvement of the interstate linkage of gas pipelines and electricity grids, allowing cross-border supply and a level of redundancy to guard against points of failure
- major improvements to telecommunications capabilities, both throughout urban and regional Australia, and through International connections, with pricing structures that are equitable across Australia
- extend the reach of state-owned television broadcasting to all regions, and encourage the private sector to do the same with the other stations
- finalise the Hume Freeway duplication project, and develop Canberra's proposed southern link into that Freeway
- develop and pave the Alpine Way, providing better tourist access to the Kosciuszko region, alleviating the East-West divide across the Alps
- develop a strategy to remove the significant fuel pricing disadvantage suffered by some regions

¹² It was claimed that this project would be Australia's biggest infrastructure project, with a high speed 4000km rail line linking the south-east Australian agricultural regions though to Darwin, providing a gateway for the transport of perishable goods to Asia. The project would employ 5000 people.

- ensure that access to Sydney's Mascot Airport does not disadvantage regional travellers
- investigate longer term means of lessening the remoteness faced by some states
- foster greater cooperation between States in developing regional infrastructure and supporting regional areas
- work toward removing anomalies and inconsistencies that impact upon those regions located near State borders
- consider the options for locating organisations regionally rather than continuing the practice of preselecting the major urban solution

Local government can play a valuable role in aiding regional development. Certainly as is my experience in the rural city of Wodonga,¹³ the municipal council both seeks and aids development. It has a clear forward plan and provides a vision for the future that aligns with community requirements.

A holistic approach must be taken by decision makers towards the nation's development and consideration must be given to the legacy that will be provided for future Australians. The fast-paced nature of today, where Australia is often seen from an altitude of 10000m whilst cruising between major cities, fails to provide an understanding of the total picture. The nation's nerve centres won't flourish if the remainder of the country is forgotten.

On a final note, a Canadian friend of mine who was consulting to the Chinese concerning the development of their road transport infrastructure, made the comment that the freeways that the Chinese are building are in a class beyond anything within North America. He felt that the Chinese should have been over telling the Americans and Canadians what to do, rather than the other way around.

What I found more interesting was the fact that they hardly have any vehicles on those freeways yet. As is the Chinese nature, they are taking the long-term view, with a strategic national plan that extends well beyond the timeframes we are accustomed to, with our short-term, incremental approaches.

¹³ Wodonga is the currently the fastest growing city within Victoria.