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**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

**Reference: Sustainable cities**

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE**  
**Thursday, 12 February 2004**

**Members:** Mr Billson (*Chair*), Ms George (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Barresi, Mr Cobb, Mr Hunt, Mr Jenkins, Mr Kerr, Mr Lindsay, Ms Livermore and Mr McArthur.

**Members in attendance:** Mr Barresi, Mr Billson, Ms George, Mr Jenkins and Ms Livermore

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Issues and policies related to the development of sustainable cities to the year 2025, particularly:

- The environmental and social impacts of sprawling urban development;
- The major determinants of urban settlement patterns and desirable patterns of development for the growth of Australian cities;
- A 'blueprint' for ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement, with particular reference to eco-efficiency and equity in the provision of services and infrastructure;
- Measures to reduce the environmental, social and economic costs of continuing urban expansion; and
- Mechanisms for the Commonwealth to bring about urban development reform and promote ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement.

**WITNESSES**

**BROWN, Emeritus Professor Valerie Anne, Director, Local Sustainability Project ..... 1**



**Committee met at 11.19 a.m.****BROWN, Emeritus Professor Valerie Anne, Director, Local Sustainability Project**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage and its inquiry into sustainable cities 2025. This hearing is the second of the inquiry. I am delighted to welcome Prof. Valerie Brown. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. On that bright and cheery note, would you like to make a brief statement or introductory remarks in relation to your submission?

**Prof. Brown**—Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to speak to my submission. I would like to speak a bit more forthrightly and more to the point than I did in my formal submission, and I welcome discussion. I really believe, and from my experience I think it is well founded, that this has the potential to be the most important inquiry of the parliament this century—and I am not saying that lightly. I am coming from a position where the city is now the key unit by which we shape not only the country but the planet. It is the key unit where your deliberations and regulations go into effect. I am well aware of the importance of the federal government in shaping cities, but until people go into a city and actually perform as they wish to live, they really have no reality. In that context, I would like to speak to rather broader terms of reference. I would like to interpret the terms of reference rather more broadly, because they are tempered by the ecological factor. I am coming from the perspective that the city is the real fulcrum of how we will live for the rest of this century and that there is a real challenge—both socially and ecologically, and that the two are interrelated. I guess that is my whole message.

I have a handout which I will distribute, headed ‘All or nothing’, and I want to speak to that. I think that the fragmentation and the single factor responses are actually responsible for some of the disasters: treating a city as a hub of violence or a physical structure does—in every case, it seems to me—totally dissolve what a city is. I have tried to summarise, on one page, the factors that I think are crucial. All of them are crucial and the interactions are crucial in trying to understand a city. So in that sense, the ‘ecological’ in your terms of reference cannot be considered without the social and the economic; there is no such thing as being able to separate it out. The ecological is indeed the underpinning of the resources and the services that are within the economy, and it is the interaction of people with their physical terrain. That is my first proposition: those three circles—which you probably see on every submission, because they are like a mantra around sustainability—are often taken apart, as if they belong in three places. For instance, local governments moved to a triple bottom line, where accounts were done from all three points.

That has met a brick wall, because it means that when you get to the strategic decisions of the councils, or the leading strategic planner, you have even greater competition. The three branches into which every council is divided just have better ammunition to fight over. I believe we need a single bottom line, and people are now working to this—industry, for instance, has moved there quicker than government. So the first point is to have a single bottom line and not a divided, triple bottom line, even if you have to collect evidence among the three. In these three circles,

you can see that the actual interaction—what happens on the ground—is what a city is; it is a sustainable community and a sustainable economy and the environment has to be supportive of both.

Having put the general position that I believe that taking out any factor—a systems or a collaborative approach—will automatically defeat some of the aims of the inquiry, I should practise what I preach. I have been working with over 100 councils and their communities—we had 3,000 in our network at one time—and with expert advice. That is almost always my role, because there is usually dispersed aggro and a conflict going on between a council, a community or an ecologist, and that tends to be when I enter the situation. My overall interest is in that combination of councils, their communities and the experts who advise them. It is not necessarily getting the various parties to agree, it is constructively moving on to make the place more excitable and viable and to make a better future.

From that experience, there are three things I would like to draw your attention to. First of all, I imagine that the submissions you have received come from one of three positions. There are reform groups who would change everything tomorrow—‘wipe it’. There are repair groups that seek to reduce the damage and repair. They say: ‘We do not have to rock the boat. We can keep going. It’s okay. Don’t worry, we’ll fix it’—and that is often a technological fix. The third is the wait-and-see group. They say: ‘It is not proven yet. It is only a vested interest of some scientists. We have got plenty of time. We can always repair it after.’ I do not know whether you have had submissions from that group, because they have got some interesting points to make.

My point is that all three agendas are absolutely essential. When you separate things, you lose the plot. I will talk to reform groups but, in any city, you cannot ignore the people who are living in it; you have to fix it right away. That is the first of the tensions. You cannot say, ‘I am a reform group’—as some of my own colleagues are—you have to fix what is, and you have got to help the people who are alive now, as well as the ones in the future. So I see that repair agenda and the technological capacity to fix things as absolutely brilliant. The wait-and-see people put the case—and I consider it is a good one—that we have got 30 years for viable cities. If you want to discuss that, I will be happy to, but I accept that that is proven. Given that, on key points there is quite an argument to be made of waiting and of asking the people and getting the research. That wait-and-see approach, whilst it holds up the people, seems to me a crucial precautionary principle.

**CHAIR**—So the wait is not inactivity, it is inquiry?

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, it is reflecting. But the two get muddled. The reform people and the repair people get very impatient with the people who have a question and want to wait and see until it is answered. That is undoubtedly the position your inquiry is in. I looked on the web site, and I think some sheer gold has come from the roundtable discussions. I have talked to people who have been at them and they are very excited.

**CHAIR**—They are quite vibrant.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely; the health people are so pleased to have the chance to make a contribution. You have this fantastic canvas on which to paint. I do not know whether anyone wants to discuss that further, but it seems that dividing those agendas or putting them into



confrontation is one of the problems that we have when cities get stuck by lobby groups. You cannot predict which political party, industry or even specialised field will grab which viewpoint. It is not like they are aligned. Just to leave that point, there are really good constructive, collaborative and consultation processes that can deal with it. It is something that we have become very good at. They are often just not invoked. The solutions are ready and available.

I will move to another point. This is probably the work I do most. This is partly research and partly where I ask you to reflect on your practical experience. When you go into an issue in a locality you have got five clear voices. It does not take you two minutes to get them. You have got the strong leadership individuals in the place and the change agents, who often do not even have access to the debate—everyone in the city knows who they are, but they are hanging around. The local community have a voice, specialist advisors have a voice and government has a voice. The way things are set up in the way we govern cities—even, dare I say it, the country—those voices are put into opposition. Those voices are given a platform—the idea of consultation is to give them a platform—and the way that platform works is often debate.

The idea that each needs to hear the others is what I work on—that each has a perfectly valid form of evidence. My scientist colleagues are not terribly impressed with this, but the position I work from is that the community's experience of its place is just as valid and important as any scientist in the country. Having it heard in the same forum is perhaps one of the most difficult things. I find that government, again, is not given the credit in planning and in these discussions for having a legitimate voice of its own. Perhaps I should not be saying that to you when you know you do, but I would be surprised if you had not had the experience of people talking past you because they think you are external to the topic.

I guess that what I can contribute—if there is any way I can—is about a five-year project with localities around the country where we have deliberately put those five voices together under circumstances in which they each have a distinct voice but can hear each other. There are some quite spectacular cases. There are cases where it has not worked—I am not talking here about a recipe or 100 per cent—but in places where it has worked we have had quite unexpected results. I never have any idea when we do it what will happen, because so often the groups have not heard each other before. This may sound simplistic but it is the case.

My favourite example, because it is probably our neatest, is Shoalhaven City Council. Do you know Shoalhaven? It is the last undeveloped part of New South Wales. It could not be more horrific—Jervis Bay, estate agents, farmers going broke, youth, drug addicted, everything. We did a year there. To put it as bluntly as possible, after a process that brought these people together so that they heard each other they put in a structure plan which allowed farmers to remain where they were, estate agents to make a profit and young people to earn a living. Usually they get about 300 objections to a structure plan in Shoalhaven. At the end of this structure plan they got six. It is neat, and I am giving you a good example, but I believe it is because of this general approach of providing a platform.

One of the voices that is often not heard clearly enough in its own right is the community vision for its own future. That is something we work from. One example is from Western Sydney, where we based a state of the environment report on the community vision. Newcastle has done this; Melbourne has done this. It is gathering speed so I am not sure how many there

are now. But the point is, and as people who run our country I think you would agree with me, that is a sound practical strategic direction and the community generated it entirely within its own resources—I do not have a clue what the people of Western Sydney would think it might be. This is something I do not see used as a tool of government as much as I believe it could be. There is that study if you wanted it. The last one—

**CHAIR**—Just that study? Are you saying there is more material about the evolution of this project?

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely. It is the first regional state of the environment report in New South Wales and the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils has it. So it is in effect. How long have I been going?

**CHAIR**—You are doing well. You have a few more minutes and then my colleagues probably have plenty of questions.

**Prof. Brown**—I would really much rather discuss things. I have painted a picture of a throbbing city in which everybody is actually working together. A lot of the formal processes separate them out again but we are talking about how they work together and particularly how they ‘vision forward’. ‘Visioning’ is not even a respectable word—that is interesting. Councils are coming to it. They like scenarios better but scenarios go from where we are forward, whereas a vision is where we would like to go and is not limited. Given that, the basic direction that we have been working towards is having those individuals, the community and the specialist advisers—who are from the government—use their capacity for holistic visioning not separate to but as part of the key process. We have over the years developed a decision making cycle and it should not be unfamiliar; it should not look like something new or clever because it is just the same planning process as planners or decision makers or senior people use.

**CHAIR**—Kolb’s work, isn’t it?

**Prof. Brown**—Kolb, yes. It was originally a psychologist’s work on how people think and make decisions all the time. I do not want to go into that. But it is as simple as that. You will also recognise the planning cycle.

We have been taking those five groups of people in any one locality and we have been saying consultation is one thing but decision making is another. So we work with them while—if we go round the cycle—they establish the principles for their place. It is very context dependent, which is why it is so relevant to your inquiry. It seems to me that you have a challenge to try to make recommendations for the whole country and for the throbbing diversity and uniqueness of cities. We have never failed to get that sort of vision and some collaboration on principles by allowing people to speak clearly, instead of saying, ‘You have to agree and you all have to be on the same page.’

So we go round the cycle. The first procedure or the first event is to get those principles on the table, but not as a single-minded consensus or the lowest common denominator: if it is a mess, it is a mess. From there, we draw on whatever there is available, and there is an enormous amount of information about this—every city must be inundated; there are masses of it. It often does not ask the questions that arrive from the principles, so you have to go and sort through it again. But

given that you have that information—like the regional state of the environment report—that to me is where the leap is. I guess that is what I am arguing for. Having done the ground work, the leap is to the potential. We should not be forever mending what we have now but be looking at the potential and where these people in this city—this place—go.

**CHAIR**—Are you saying that, with the principles and values articulated, the process says: ‘What does that look like? How do you characterise those principles and values on the ground? What are the metrics we can use?’ Then you talk about—

**Prof. Brown**—How far you could go.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Prof. Brown**—So it is grounded. In getting the principles it is a matter of what principles the key sectors hold, so it may look like a mess or a tapestry. If they all agreed, I would not believe it; I would think I had done it wrongly. It is a matter of getting it so that the sectors hear each other. So often one of them is running the system and wanting agreement on something, whereas this is allowing for debate and conflict—if that is what it is—to come out. Then there is the underlying question of what that is—yes, exactly. Then you put the metrics, the measures—I am a great measurer—underneath what they have said. So if someone says, ‘No child in poverty by 2000’—forgive me, that is not a very good example but it leapt to my mind; I was trying to think of the most far out—then you go back and say, ‘How many children are in poverty now? What is poverty? Are you all going to agree on what poverty is?’ They are probably not, but whatever.

**CHAIR**—So it is operationalising those values.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—And it is saying what they would look like—if you attained those values and principles you would know it because this, this and this would happen.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely. And indeed with that community vision—its goals and the indicators the community chose—we actually said to people, ‘How would you know if you had got that?’ That is exactly how we designed the indicators: ‘Walking around this city every day, how would you know you had whatever it is.’ That is absolutely right, thank you, Bruce.

The lead to the potential is, to me, an opportunity of our times. I am trying to think what we have in this country, but worldwide there are people with visions of cities—I think I mentioned a couple of authors—working on the indicators and working on pragmatic components and infrastructure of cities with incredible accounts of how and where a city is going. That may not suit Australia and it may not suit every city, but in generating that I would love to see the inquiry reach into that world. In every city there are those people—the futurists and the people seeing forward.

Having leapt into whatever future there is, we make a big distinction between a wish list and a vision. From your work and your careers you must know that if you go near a community they will give you a wish list in two minutes, but I am not talking about that. The processes I am

talking about do not do that. The question is: 'What would you like your city to be like to live in.' The wishes come after that.

Finally, if you do not have an opportunity to test that potential in practice it remains in the never-never. On all the projects we have done we have actually tried to implement what was said. I say 'tried' because sometimes that is not easy, but we put it into practice and evaluate it so that the wheel turns and the change happens. I think that is enough.

**CHAIR**—It is plenty. It is a refreshing presentation of what might be and where we could do some constructive work. I would like to try to relate your experiences with some of the material you referred to in your submission and what could be. Let us take the Shoalhaven example. The output to the general public was a structure plan which looked largely like a land use planning thing. I imagine there would be a bunch of other undertakings to flesh out town planning concepts.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely. It was a restructure plan and we were hired by the people who were going to do it, who could not see for one minute that they could get it through. They said, 'We were given a year and we want to do this and we think it is impossible.' So we had a visioning process throughout the community. We had stalls in the street at Shoalhaven bay or whatever it is called. One of the things that we find important is to work through existing organisations and not badge yourself as something new. It is more a case of asking, 'Who are the organisations in this town, do they cover everything and how can we work with them?' With Shoalhaven we worked with Main Street. Do people know about Main Street?

**CHAIR**—Yes, there is a similar thing in Melbourne called City Pride or something; it is the same idea.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, it is a future city thing that is small business led. We also worked with Healthy Cities, which has gone very well everywhere but I believe, even though I work out of public health, that it remains health dominated—you have to drag it back from the hospital and the medical practitioners. So we had Healthy Cities, Main Street and we had absolutely besotted small villages; we had the community groups from the small villages and so on. I am giving you just the tip of the outcome.

**CHAIR**—So he said, 'Here is a structure plan,' but you said, 'There are other legs in this stool to make the transformation that you are imagining.'

**Prof. Brown**—The structure plan was the pragmatic structural goal of the council. Our brief was to find a preferred future that everybody would accept.

**CHAIR**—So you had other activation tools that would just use that as a footprint, effectively?

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely. Indeed, we started by not even saying that we were about the structure plan. If you can bear the detail of that, it was really funny. We were hired to do a structure plan for the preferred future of the southern Shoalhaven. The very first interview I did, somebody said, 'I don't live in the southern Shoalhaven.' I said, 'You don't?' It turned out that the whole area identifies with its coastal villages, and we had to call the study 'from North

Durras to southern Something', because nobody but the council had any idea what southern Shoalhaven even was. Does that make sense of how you go in with what there is?

**CHAIR**—Yes. But how does that relate to the LA21 agenda, the ICLEI work here, which is very menu driven? I imagine that is the distinction you are drawing with the British experience.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—Can you flesh that out?

**Prof. Brown**—I would really like to.

**Ms GEORGE**—Chair, you are so perceptive!

**CHAIR**—That is the nicest thing you have ever said to me. Sorry, we are just having a little moment here!

**Prof. Brown**—You are bang on. A lot of the projects that we were hired to do were under a Local Agenda 21 banner. I worked with ICLEI very strongly; I go to their conferences. I think the badging and ownership has destroyed Local Agenda 21 everywhere. That is a very flamboyant statement, but it is my experience.

**Ms GEORGE**—Why is that flamboyant?

**Prof. Brown**—In the same way that Healthy Cities never left Health, Local Agenda 21 never left government.

**CHAIR**—It is bolted on.

**Prof. Brown**—It just didn't get community trust. The label did not mean anything to communities, and councils could not let it go. I have been on several councils' Local Agenda 21 committees. They have community members on them but you could see that councils could not let it go. They could not be honest and say: 'This is our position; these are our resources. Now the community will listen.' They just couldn't do it. It is harder than you think.

**CHAIR**—And the British one?

**Prof. Brown**—The British one was legislated and funded, so it almost became an arm of government. I do not believe it is an arm of what I want to do, but it was very successful in bringing the environmental impact of cities to councils and governments. I would say it remained within that government arena, even in Britain, even though it was so good. Funnily enough, in North America, where it has no official backing and is not really even in the United States philosophy, there are places where it has got up. Hamilton in Canada is a great example; it was community driven and it went much better.

**CHAIR**—It took off?

**Prof. Brown**—Yes. It was because there was no big apparatus to link it to.

**Ms GEORGE**—You put a lot of emphasis on collaborative processes at the local level. What do you see then as the role of the committee? Do we have a role in trying to flesh out some generalised statement of principle? Every city is different and we want the community to be involved, so what is our role?

**Prof. Brown**—In the report that you will bring down?

**Ms GEORGE**—Yes, what do you think would be helpful?

**Prof. Brown**—I would think that if you could embrace general principles which involve open-endedness and an absence of ambiguity—and there is a word, ‘dialogue’, that is coming into the language a bit. It has a technical meaning where I am. If you could embrace that with ways in which cities could self-determine and self-identify, that would be fantastic.

**CHAIR**—To sort of argue for the process?

**Prof. Brown**—Argue for the process, and even then with the process being reflective. If you go into a big city, there are differences—but I do not have to say that. Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane are just unbelievable. I do not want to make a recipe either, so I am stuck, but in the research we have those five sectors, if you mix them, have been running processes where you give them each a platform but the others have to listen to each other, and then you mix them, and then you go back to them. I am not saying this is a recipe that I am wishing on you, but I just mean that sort process and what sectors have to be. Even think of disability and equity issues. Those sorts of reports said, ‘We can’t tell you; we don’t want to tell you what the people want but we can tell you they have to have this access.’ It is that sort of approach. I am trying to think of some examples. Pittsburgh, of all places, which had to reinvent itself from a steel city to a dignified city, is very interesting, as is Hamilton in Canada, and Oxford, funnily enough, with its mix of academics that have been fighting for centuries. Some of those really difficult places have come out with the most interesting things. It is about accepting conflict, I think, and using dialogue. I am just using words here, but there is a whole lot of stuff behind all this. If there is a decision-making process that entails this openness but has the requirement that tasks be completed—do you see that combination?

**CHAIR**—You work with a shared purpose even though people might have different ideas about what comes first and what is most important: ‘Okay, we’ll tolerate that but we still need to move things forward.’

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, I think so, but not even tolerate. In my area it is extraordinary. We all know what a city or a community is like: ‘Here is the formal thing that is meant to happen and these people have responsibility and accountability.’ It never works like that. Does anyone ever go about city work like it is formal procedure? Not that that does not matter. Of course it does. I am not knocking that out, but those informal, interactive processes need fostering.

**Mr BARRESI**—I will come to back to that. It seems to me that one of the dilemmas we are having in Building Better Cities is that the more global we become and the bigger the city becomes the greater is the need and the want from the community to hold onto something which is theirs.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes.

**Mr BARRESI**—You know, that sense of identity.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely.

**Mr BARRESI**—So, Melbourne can be as big as you like, going from Frankston in Bruce's area right through to Harry's area, but there is still that group that wants to say, 'But we live in, and our community is.'

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, that identity.

**Mr BARRESI**—How do you hold onto that and make sure that that is built into a city framework?

**Prof. Brown**—You use some sort of visioning process. There are a lot, but it could work if you allow the people to work together under circumstances that they feel free to say, 'Yes, that is our identity.' The Western Sydney one was a hoot.

**Ms GEORGE**—Yes, you have got identity there, haven't you?

**Prof. Brown**—Would you believe what they wanted? 'Sydney has an opera house: what have we got?' The other thing that people said, 'Oh, Western Sydney. Don't be ridiculous, you can't do a vision for Western Sydney, no, nobody knows what it is.' Western Sydney did—exactly what you said—they knew. It was not a problem, but everyone else was labelling them as the dormitory of Sydney and all this stuff. Not them, they weren't, but isn't that a hoot, and that drawing is the local fun park.

**Ms GEORGE**—What is it, the fun park?

**Prof. Brown**—They gave us three suggestions.

**CHAIR**—The Adventure World they call that.

**Ms GEORGE**—Oh, yes.

**Prof. Brown**—I nearly fainted. That is what they wanted, so that is what we put there. I would defy you to find a community, even a disrupted community—I am really branching off here. There is some work in Brazil by Paul Ferrero of displaced communities which is very interesting. He even found they were illiterate, they were displaced. We have a similar problem in this country, don't we, and I work with Indigenous communities too. I do not know anyone who lives in a place that does not.

**Mr BARRESI**—Where I am seeing evidence of this, and curiously we see enough in the cities, is with the closure of banks. I see this happening more and more, and the Bendigo Bank coming in has almost given people—

**Ms GEORGE**—A focus point.

**Mr BARRESI**—a focus point on, ‘This is my little community of Blackburn.’ So it is not even the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, or the municipality.

**Ms GEORGE**—It is the neighbourhood.

**Mr BARRESI**—It is almost getting to the neighbourhood level of identity and fighting for and preserving that.

**Prof. Brown**—I know, absolutely, and for that they will fight to the death. Look at my little Shoalhaven communities or whatever. Releasing that as synergy rather than as anger is what I am—I know I am an idealist, but I am very practical. As you are saying, it is there. That seems to me what we can move forward on, not let us stop global warming. We have got to. We will not have cities if we do not, but, on the other hand, that is not going to be what brings the community into energy and fluidity.

**CHAIR**—Just that local meaning, that local expression.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely, and then they will come back. In another study—a very old study—we were asked to look at what global warming meant to local government. No-one had ever asked that, so that was a very interesting little project. We started off asking about global warming, and they just said, ‘Oh well, you academics can go home, because that’s not what we’re on about.’ So I said, ‘Right, well, what are you doing about air pollution?’ ‘Lots.’ ‘What are you doing about storm surge?’ ‘Lots.’ The figures have come out since at that local level—the greatest financial contribution to environmental sustainability is at the local level, but once you ask them what they were doing in their place about global change, they knew. So ask them about global warming. I think that that grounding is absolutely—

**Ms LIVERMORE**—The experiences that you have been describing so far have seemed like they have mainly been initiated by local authorities: is that true?

**Prof. Brown**—No, I have been called in by councils and by communities. Yes, Pitt Town at the moment, and I have just been at Port Pirie—that was an interesting experience too. So often the community will ask us to come—and we do, of course—but where you get a long-term project that has gone over a year and we can make a difference, it is usually government money.

**Ms LIVERMORE**—So if we as a committee are looking at ways of unleashing this kind of movement across the country, is there the capacity there within our institutions or universities, or the professions and specialities that work in this area to cope with that?

**Prof. Brown**—I actually believe it recoups half the stuff that is wasted. The things that you need for, say, a utopian city, are there now. There is government, regulations and frameworks and specialists buzzing away giving consultancy reports that may not be different from the last one—if I can be quite brutal. They could put the same energy into a visionary one. We have just been talking about the community one. That energy is there but is not tapped. I actually believe it is more efficient, even in a cold-blooded efficiency mode. It is the people’s denial of change that makes that threshold very difficult.



**Ms LIVERMORE**—So you are saying that a lot of that activity is happening but it could be done within a better framework?

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely—and more constructively. ‘Collaboratively’ does not mean they are all friends, either; just working together towards the shared—

**Ms LIVERMORE**—You have described the decision-making framework. What do you see as the main barriers to putting that into practice in the Australian context?

**Prof. Brown**—Territories. I am sorry to use one word. Almost all our work has been on developing skills. I do not mean to banish territories. A lot of the collaboration and consultation work is about, ‘No, you cannot have your own territory.’

**CHAIR**—But you are not just talking about real estate.

**Prof. Brown**—No, sorry.

**CHAIR**—You are talking about knowledge territory, too—like, ‘This is my expertise.’

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, ‘This I my expertise; this is my world; I run this town’ or whatever it is.

**CHAIR**—‘My expert view will prevail.’

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, ‘My expert view will prevail.’ I am talking about finding a platform, situations and processes that will allow people to, as I keep on saying, hear each other—which sounds so simple, but I really mean it. They have often never heard each other’s case.

**Ms LIVERMORE**—Is there a disparity? You talk about the five different groups who need to be engaged in this framework or in the process. Is there a disparity between the capacity of those groups to take part that can undermine it?

**Prof. Brown**—That is an absolute key question. Each of those groups, because of territories, is extraordinarily competent. If you think of the city not dissolving into chaos, instead of criticising and thinking, ‘Why doesn’t it collapse?’, you realise that each of those people is doing an extraordinarily good job already. It is not as if each does not have their own capacities; it is this dominance of, for example, ‘You’re incapable; I’m the one that has the—

**Ms LIVERMORE**—So mutual respect for people’s different and respective speciality or understanding within their particular area?

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely, and even getting to know it. Bruce said ‘knowledge’, that is what I work on—the actual expansion of knowledge; when you know what a community can do. In my field of expertise, which is health and ecology, I often hear my colleagues tell a community about what their ecology is when half the audience know more species than they do. We have grown into it as a cultural habit, I think. Is that okay—because it is such a key question?

**Ms LIVERMORE**—Yes.

**Prof. Brown**—I believe it is there to be tapped.

**CHAIR**—Mr Jenkins?

**Mr JENKINS**—I am probably all questioned out. You gave Mr Barresi time to think, and he asked the question that I wanted to ask in a much better, more original and innovative way. If we talking about sustainable cities, the question I have to ask is about aggregation and sustainable communities. I think that is the way that we move to achieve it—for example, if you look at Melbourne and you talk about the metropolis of Melbourne being a sustainable city. How Bruce's communities would do it and how Phil's communities may be different to the way the communities I represent do it but, by using these principles, I do not think it ends up being a conflict overall. Even though we are in the early stages of the inquiry, whilst somebody like Kirsten—because of the regional and rural area that she represents—thought she was out of this inquiry, the point is that it applies to all the subsets that she represents.

**Prof. Brown**—Absolutely.

**Mr JENKINS**—I think from a federal angle that is the interesting thing. I suppose I am seeking assurance that there is no conflict—that is, that, as we have the communities aggregating into cities or into regions, we sort of roll on and still get the same sorts of outcomes that we would like to see.

**Prof. Brown**—Again, you need to address it square-on. It is often used as a way of dividing. There is one image I use with regions. We had to get nine councils to agree on that report. I still have scars on my back, actually. It is not simple. There are schema, where people look at what you aggregate and how you aggregate it.

We all know that there is a discontinuity between a neighbourhood and a community and a city. There is a discontinuity of scale where people know you have crossed them; you are not just going to aggregate. Again, I go back to Western Sydney, because it seems to be appropriate here. We did that through holding community based visioning workshops to which the council reps—I had a bit of control—had to come as residents of Western Sydney, so they actually got a bit—

**CHAIR**—Personal.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes. They could not be there, and then we had later meetings where they were there in their own power of saying, 'Well, we cannot give you that indicator, because we will never do it.' So the realism came back later, but we did it there—and we have done other things. You can do it at a street level.

**CHAIR**—But it would seem that an organic scaling up would be recognised by people—

**Prof. Brown**—They are.

**CHAIR**—in that some the language here—it says to me, 'We cannot do this on our own'—seems a far better way of going about it than having governments which intuitively know the same thing but which come in and drop a regional planning authority on top of people, saying,

‘Cop that.’ Here we know we cannot do this on our own and we can perhaps look for that broader overlay rather than have people subjected to it.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, and it is often language. I am on the sustainability group for Canberra. I think they have listened and it is really good. But we did some community stuff and then the territory government put their own words on it, and immediately everyone said, ‘That’s not what we said.’

**Mr BARRESI**—Those words lead on to my last question, and it is partly based on today’s lead story in Canberra regarding the amalgamation of the councils around the territory. You have your five contributors of knowledge, which is fantastic, but it seems to me that hanging over those five contributors will always be the political viewpoints. Maybe you refer to it in your territory example, but politics, ideology and political power will always hang over those and sway the relative influence of one of those groups versus the other. How can we achieve that so that it actually comes for the good of that community, rather than the equitable knowledge?

**Prof. Brown**—It is, again, a key question—the amalgamations. Southern Sydney is even more interesting. My argument would be that, of the five sectors, at the moment the New South Wales government is exerting its power over the others, but that is not the end of the story. I am well aware of what is gathering underneath that, and it gathered in central southern Sydney, but it lost. But here I am well aware of what there is mobilising underneath that edict and I do not know that the answer is in yet. I can see, but how many things do get overturned because the dialogue was not held before.

**CHAIR**—I wonder about the preconditions that lead to the kind of work you are talking about being successful. There seems to be a shared recognition that something is not quite right.

**Prof. Brown**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—And because of that, there is an appetite for some new input, new capacity, new tools—with your ideas and the approach that you adopt. Is that the start of reorientating people’s preparedness to engage and listen to each other because amongst themselves they have agreed something is not right and they say, ‘We can’t quite nail this sucker. Let’s bring in some extra horsepower.’ I am wondering whether if we walked up to people and said, ‘You guys think things are going great, but we are not so sure; here’s Val,’ we would not get past first base with them.

**Prof. Brown**—No, you would not, not for one minute. Our project does not match anything like that either. Thinking of your inquiry and where it might go, I know there is already an idea that there could be some pilot projects, because model and pilot projects can break ground. Even if you went for the capital cities, and there are the lord mayors of capital cities—and they are quite interesting to deal with—it would take some thought as to how you get your sample as there are so many ways. I would suggest that you could do a key sample of about seven so everyone could watch them. I think that an entire detail thing does not work—like saying every city in the country is going to get a prize; it just blurs away. Having cities bidding for a place in a project sometimes work quite well. They tell all sorts of lies to get there.

**CHAIR**—But self-selecting.

**Prof. Brown**—Something like that. Some they have to convince you that they—

**CHAIR**—Are ready.

**Prof. Brown**—They are the worst, or the best, or they are the readiest, or something. That would take some work. Let them know from the beginning you are encouraging their identity and encouraging them to say what would be sustainable for them and to set their own benchmark—and I am very keen on cities having their own benchmark; I think Phillip was thinking of that too—so that that is legitimate. How they come up with that could be so exciting.

**CHAIR**—It is a very interesting change model in itself. If people are feeling overrun by change they are not happy with, your opening phase accepts change as a given and asks—

**Prof. Brown**—It gives them back their control.

**CHAIR**—what kind of change they would prefer. It gets them out of the rut of saying, ‘Why can’t it be like it was five—

**Prof. Brown**—Yes, and says: ‘What do you want to keep and what do you want to change back? You decide.’ If they could run with a framework for change like that—not badging it but labelling it; what you call it would be important—I think you would have to give them three years. I know that is hard in a parliamentary cycle, so you do not have that long. Any community would know.

**CHAIR**—Stronger families and communities are around for three years, so it is not impossible.

**Ms LIVERMORE**—Is the involvement of an independent or an outside facilitator a key to the whole thing?

**Prof. Brown**—I have seen it over and over again that even the smallest office, with a small group of people—the whole of Landcare originated from a three-person office—who have some capacity and skill to have no other allegiance but to keep the cities doing, can do magic. I think Bruce and I have discussed something like this before. I think it would need to be not based visibly in government.

**Mr JENKINS**—I heard so much about an office, but I want to be just a little self-indulgent. I am going off to look up some notes from when I was a younger person as a student, or a younger tutor, because in thanking Val for her presentation I have to thank her for more of the influence she had on me as a student.

**Prof. Brown**—Thank you, Harry. I was not sure if you would remember.

**CHAIR**—Even if the outcomes that one hopes for are not always attained, the ethos that is embodied in your process cannot help but be a positive influence on people’s interactions around our city.

**Prof. Brown**—I am now trying to sell utopia. Only quite recently I thought, ‘Look, I might as well come clean and ask why did we do away with utopias’—and you know you cannot get them, of course.

**CHAIR**—Yes, it is worth having a go.

**Prof. Brown**—Anything forward would be good.

**CHAIR**—Val, what a stimulating contribution. Thank you, I really enjoyed it.

**Resolved (on motion by Ms George):**

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Prof. Brown**—Good luck with your inquiry, because I am deadly serious in saying I think it could be just magic.

**CHAIR**—And an ad too—Val’s ‘The Utopian City’ will be appearing in the March-April magazine of *About the House*, so our committee and its work is generating most of the interesting content in the *About the House* magazine.

**Committee adjourned at 12.16 p.m.**