

Additional comments from the Australian Greens

Introduction

1.1 The Australian Greens would like to thank all who submitted to this inquiry and who attended public hearings. We sincerely appreciate your interest and passion in this issue, and the commitment of time and effort to help inform the committee of the myriad of issues facing regional capitals and the complexity of responses that governments at all levels need to consider.

1.2 The Australian Greens would also like to acknowledge the committee's work on this inquiry. The Chair's report provides a valuable precis of regional capitals and provides a clear framework to develop policy responses. The Greens support the recommendations contained in the Chair's report.

Decentralisation

1.3 As articulated in the committee report, post-war settlement patterns in Australia mimic those in much of the developed world, being a shift from smaller agrarian townships to larger urban centres. This has seen population grow in regional capitals, but not nearly to the same extent as population has grown in capital cities.

1.4 As a result—and despite perceptions to the contrary—Australia is one of the most heavily urbanised countries in the developed world, and has one of the highest concentrations of population in large capital cities in the world.

1.5 There is a sporadic history of government actively encouraging decentralisation of the population, particularly by locating government departments in regional capitals. Examples of Commonwealth agencies being deliberately housed in regional capitals include the location of the ASIC Registry in Traralgon, the ATO in Albury, and, more recently, the NDIS in Geelong. The location CSIRO in Hobart, Australia's smallest capital city, is a similar example and one that has been highly successful.

1.6 However, the Australian Greens acknowledge that the efficacy of active decentralisation policy has been mixed, and that it can be difficult to balance the national interest with local interest. For example, the recent decision to locate the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority in regional NSW would appear to be more 'pork' than good public policy.

1.7 The Australian Greens believe there is a pressing need for active decentralisation policy to be considered in much greater detail than this inquiry has had the resources to do. We need to build the evidence on how to do decentralisation properly. These are decisions which have a generational timespan. It is incumbent on government to develop an informed view on settlement patterns and how it should respond so as to best secure the very long term prosperity of regional Australia.

Recommendation

1.8 The Australian Greens recommend that the government request the Productivity Commission to undertake an inquiry into the success of previous decentralisation policies in Australia and the potential for future active decentralisation policy in Australia, particularly in light of the strains on settlement patterns in capital cities.

Senator Peter Whish-Wilson