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BUSINESS COMPANIES COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

OPINION

Decentralisation is a solution to population growth

By Laurie Patton

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As Christopher Pyne recently pointed out, Australia has roughly the same land mass as the United States yet a fraction of the population. Despite accommodating 300-plus million people only a handful of American cities are anywhere near the size of Sydney or Melbourne.

Government agencies all argue immigration creates economic growth. So it's not about how many of us there are, it's about where we all live.

We need a decentralisation policy and some "smart city" thinking. That includes looking at how the clever use of new technology allows people to leave our overcrowded capital cities, voluntarily of course.



Sydney needs to decentralise its population. MARK MERTON

It means encouraging businesses to relocate so that they, too, enjoy the lower costs of operating in regional centres. Otherwise house prices will continue to escalate, along with more traffic congestion and frayed nerves. Decentralisation would help de-stress the capital cities as our population inevitably increases.

Four decades ago the Whitlam government established the Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation – the first and regrettably the last serious attempt to foster decentralisation.

Back then a lack of communications services was an insurmountable stumbling block at a time when meetings were habitually held face-to-face and before we even had fax machines.

These days numerous jobs can be performed pretty much anywhere, allowing of course for a decent broadband connection.

The NSW government-sponsored Greater Sydney Commission plans to turn the city into a “tri-metropolis” by effectively creating three CBDs. They say this will take 40 years.

We could do a lot of other imaginative things over four decades. The scheme relies on the construction of a huge number of apartment buildings and offices. The argument goes that Millennials will happily forgo their house-and-land package to reside in the sky. But what happens when they inevitably settle down with two children and a dog?

The amount of money being spent on infrastructure in Melbourne and Sydney would go a long way towards building smart communities in regional centres.

Even allowing for the fact that a good portion of the country is desert and unsuitable there’s no shortage of land around the edges of the continent – which is probably where most people would prefer to live anyway.

And finally, of course, we need fast trains connecting some of our regional centres. They’re doing this in other countries, so why not here?

Laurie Patton was the inaugural chief executive of the Australian Smart Communities Association.
