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Special Issue on Victoria's Regional Resources

(By Beta a special contributor.)

1/9/9

Some members of T.R.G. believe a more fundamental humanist stand should be taken in relation to Melbourne's future.

The argument is that too big a city is a bad thing. There must be an optimum size. We should determine that optimum and divert all growth beyond that point elsewhere. All plans presented to the Minister for Local Government Mr. Hamer were criticised from this stand point because they made no attempt to state any such principle, and were simply based on permitting current trends to take their course with some lip-service to decentralisation.

2/9/8

An example of an argument for decentralisation pushed to its extreme was quoted in 'Irregular' 21/7/68 : Mr. Colin Clark advocated 10 new individual cities each of 250,000, one to be started every two years "with complementary industries."

Yet, extreme as that prospect seems, an effort of that magnitude would be necessary to hold Melbourne's population at say, 2,500,000, approximately as present population.

The enormity of such a task should be grasped : -

1. Geelong is 100,000 or so. The proposition means establishing 10 cities each $2\frac{1}{2}$ times the size of Geelong with industry to match.
2. If the effort misfired and "only" 10 cities each the size of Geelong were created, (still an enormous effort), Melbourne would still grow at a faster rate than all the decentralisation effort and would be, say 4 million instead of 5 million by the end of the century with only 1 million extra "decentralised" persons.

3/9/8

Incidentally 100,000 is the new official "magical" number. Having attained such a population, it is believed that a town is "on its feet" and from that point on can grow on its own account without special subsidies and concessions.

The Report of the Decentralization Advisory Committee (Vic.) issued last December advocated subsidies and accelerated development of Ballarat, Bendigo and the Latrobe Valley complete to the target of 100,000. NOTE: No recommendations are contemplated for starting completely new towns, and each of the three centres chosen are already for 40,000 to 60,000 in size. Melbourne increases its size by this magnitude each year.

(NOTE: The above figures are based on present migration and population trends continuing. And in presenting the following facts we are conscious that they apply only to Victoria and that decentralisation prospects in other parts of Australia may be different.)

Not all T.R.G. Members agree that a big city or "conurbation" is a bad thing. But whatever the attitude to the ideal target both "camps" should know the likely limits of the alternatives to unrestricted city growth. What follows is a rather hastily prepared "run-down" on regional planning by a special contributor.

The daily press recently announced proposals for amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act to revive (writers term) the concept of regional planning in Victoria. (Age 21/2/1968.)

4/9/8 What is meant by Regional Planning?

The objective of all planning is or should be the most beneficial use of the resources of the country. (Quote Regional Boundaries Committee Report 1944 Page 6)

Regional planning is not a new idea in Victoria. The Report just cited was a preliminary survey made as a result of a request by the Commonwealth Government that all States gather resources information as a basis for planned development of the nation.

5/9/8 What constitutes a region?

"A region has been defined as an area of land which has natural geographic boundaries, and which is united by characteristics of its natural resources and common social and economic interests." (Report Page 6.)

Victoria was divided into 13 regions the most important of which are now Port Phillip and West Gippsland. The names of the others, such as Mallee, Wimmera, Goulburn, and Upper Goulburn, indicate the general area covered.

6/9/8 What has been done since the Report?

Since 1944 a small group of Victorian public servants, the Central Planning Authority in the Premier's Department have carried on the work giving particular attention to the Latrobe Valley sub-region of the West Gippsland Region. Several surveys of this area have been made for particular purposes and are listed in the source materials.

The Central Planning Authority has also completed more detailed surveys of most of the regions as well as co-operating with the M.M.B.W. in planning the latter's section of the Port Phillip Region (3,200 square miles) and other planning authorities.

7/9/8 The Metropolis

The Committee suggested that the Port Phillip Region should be divided into three sub-regions : -

1. the metropolitan area
2. the rural areas - Shire of Whittlesea to the western boundary of the region, the Shires of Werribee and Bacchus Marsh
3. the rural areas - East from the Shire of Whittlesea and including the Mornington Peninsula.

The present proposal for the metropolitan planning schemes is an area of approximately 2,100 square miles excluding the Mornington Peninsula and some other areas.

8/9/8 Is Regional planning any use?

A review of the information contained in the Report shows that more detailed exploration needed to be done to discover what minerals we have. The writer has not had the opportunity to peruse the more up to date and detailed surveys made of most regions, but is of the opinion that few new facts on natural resources have come to light. There is therefore no foundation for detailed planning in the various regions. This does not mean regional planning is useless, it shows that exploration to seek at present unknown resources is important.

As an example of this, compare the recent development of Geelong and of the Latrobe Valley with the stagnation of Ballarat, Bendigo and say Maryborough and Castlemaine. The latter have no important local resources on which expansion can be based. On the other hand, the areas with natural resources are forging ahead.

9/9/8

The growth of the Latrobe Valley has depended almost solely on the presence of brown coal as a source of energy. The paper and pulp, cement and brick industries as well as the huge thermal power stations make use of this fuel. A few light industries have been set up in the area, not all of them have been successful.

A report made for the State Electricity Commission of Victoria in 1947 "Latrobe Valley Development Interim Regional Survey and Report" mentions (Page 14) the existence of a deposit of 900,000 tons of bauxite in the region; investigations about this time showed it not to be a commercial proposition then. Now it is not even mentioned in reports on the region e.g. 1965 Victorian Year Book Pages 791 - 797.

How fair dinkum are we about developing resources?

10/9/8 Is decentralisation viable?

The State Governments policy of decentralisation as exemplified in the Local Government Act provides for decentralisation beyond a radius of 50 miles from Melbourne but also concessions to industries established in municipalities 35-50 miles from Melbourne. The latter concessions do not appear to be based in any way on the availability of resources merely closeness to Melbourne.

Towns such as Sunbury, Bacchus Marsh, Gisborne and Werribee are seeking industries with little success.

The Yakka Overalls Company has a factory site in Sunbury but there is not sufficient female labour in the district.

Improved passenger rail links to these towns could hasten their development as "dormitory" areas to which industry could later be attracted by the labour resources.

11/9/8 The Possibilities of the Glenelg Region.

The proper application of regional planning can be illustrated by what has been done in this region in the past twenty years and what can be done. Portland, the regional centre has been made an overseas port capable of berthing large vessels.

The present manufacturing industries, food processing and saw mills can be expanded when softwood plantations already established are ready to cut for the special uses made of softwood and the region's limestone can be used easily. Cheap energy is a problem which may best be solved by the discovery offshore of oil or natural gas. Gas was discovered off South-eastern South Australia about 100 miles away but not yet in commercial quantities.

Water is plentiful in the region but due to the small difference in altitude over the region there is little possibility for reservoirs and hydro-electric power generation.

The Report of the Decentralisation Advisory Committee 1967 (Page 25) selects Portland as a place with great development potential and recommends that incentives be given to encourage the establishment of industries and commercial undertakings there. The Report does not, however, make reference to possible industries nor to resources on which to base them.

It is contended that decentralisation for its own sake is pointless and expensive to the consumer and the taxpayer.

Because of the lack of government initiative in the exploration for minerals and because of limited prospects for the expansion of forestry and primary production, we do not appear to be ready for regional planning on a State-wide scale. The question, then, is for the time being: -

12/9/8

Decentralisation or Conurbation?

The spirit or ideal of regional planning requires unity in a region both amongst its people and of its resources and economic interests. (For an enthusiastic description of regional planning in action see David Lelienthel's "T.V.A. Democracy on the March". His is the story of the early years of the Tennessee Valley Authority, in the New Deal era. Penguin Special (SIS) 1944.)

Commonsense dictates that a city or a region does not grow and expand unless there is some feature which catalyses the growth. Money drawn from the taxpayers' pockets to pay "incentives" subsidies or allow freight concessions for decentralised industries is an unnatural feature and liable to failure like a castle built on sand.

In the absence of known natural resources as a basis for the development of country cities e.g. Ballarat and Bendigo attempts to expand them may be fruitless.

13/9/8

Why does the Decentralisation Report advocate the expansion of Ballarat and Bendigo?

There are several possible reasons: -

1. their populations are about half way to the magic number 100,000 and they provide ready-made nuclei to which to attract population
2. the people of these cities are voters and can be expected to support a government which uses money from the taxpayers, the majority of whom live in Melbourne, to develop their cities. (The Committee which made the Report is composed mostly of politicians.)

3. the cities are, historically and because of the road and rail links, which grew up around the turn of the century, the centres of spheres of influence, but they are not regional centres in the way that Morwell-Traralgon, with the brown coal fields all about, are in the Latrobe Valley.

Whether or not the reasons are good enough to justify expansion is a matter of personal preference.

It is the writer's opinion that we would do better to develop and re-develop the Geelong-Melbourne-Dandenong-Frankston conurbation and expand along the corridor into Gippsland.

14/9/8

What of Western Port?

A conurbation so directed would be usefully supplemented by the projected Western Port consortium of industries: Lysaght Steel mills, Cresco fertilisers, B.S.S.O. - B.H.P. refinery and possibly later, a petro-chemical industry utilising both crude oil and natural gas.

The selection of WesternPort for enterprises such as these was inevitable because it has a superior deep-water anchorage most desirable for this type of industry. Whether this would have a retarding effect on the development of the Latrobe Valley or a beneficial effect is debatable. In the long term, it should benefit the Valley.