

Albury-Wodonga, Fifty Years On

Bruce Pennay

Fifty years ago, on 25 January 1973, the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, the Premier of NSW, Sir Robert Askin, and the Premier of Victoria, Dick Hamer posed for the camera on Lincoln Causeway as they launched the Albury-Wodonga National Growth project.



They announced their intention to grow Albury and Wodonga jointly and rapidly in a selective decentralisation project to relieve Sydney and Melbourne of their congestion problems.

Four key features of the project illustrate some of its strengths and weaknesses.

First, the growth centre project was an uncommon example of cooperative federalism in regional development. The three governments agreed to build 'another Canberra' on the Murray River.

Cooperative federalism worked well when initiated and funded by the federal government, then faltered when federal government enthusiasm and support waned.

Second, the federal government's endowment of a huge land bank gave the project long-term financial backing. The project continued, even in a diminished form, well beyond the Whitlam years because the federal government wanted to retrieve as much money as it could from its initial land bank investment.

The huge land bank also facilitated the introduction of innovative urban planning. Planners laid out new suburban pods with allotments well prepared with basic services, trees and small community centres, set midst parks and in pedestrian friendly road patterns.

Third, rapid growth in population required rapid growth in jobs. It was calculated that the population target of 300,000 required over ten times the number of new jobs as had been acquired in any previous year.

This was a government-led enterprise and government-initiated army, tax office and paper mill expansion did create new jobs.

Fourth, enormous energy was given to promoting Albury-Wodonga as Australia's Growing Place. The hyphenated term Albury-Wodonga was peddled widely as an attractive national brand name.

Special steps were taken to welcome new industries, businesses and people.

New industrial estates provided well serviced, low-cost premises to help businesses get established. New residential estates had rental houses for newcomers to use as stepping-stone accommodation until they could make their own housing arrangements.

Fifty years on, a revisit to the heady days of a reformist government's bold vision for the joint and rapid development of Albury-Wodonga coincides with a rethinking of the Two Cities One Community strategic priorities.

In 2023, unlike 1973, both federal and state governments seem intent on reviving capital city CBDs confounded by COVID, rather than on fostering regional development to relieve city congestion.