

Sydney's planning storm is building to a tempest

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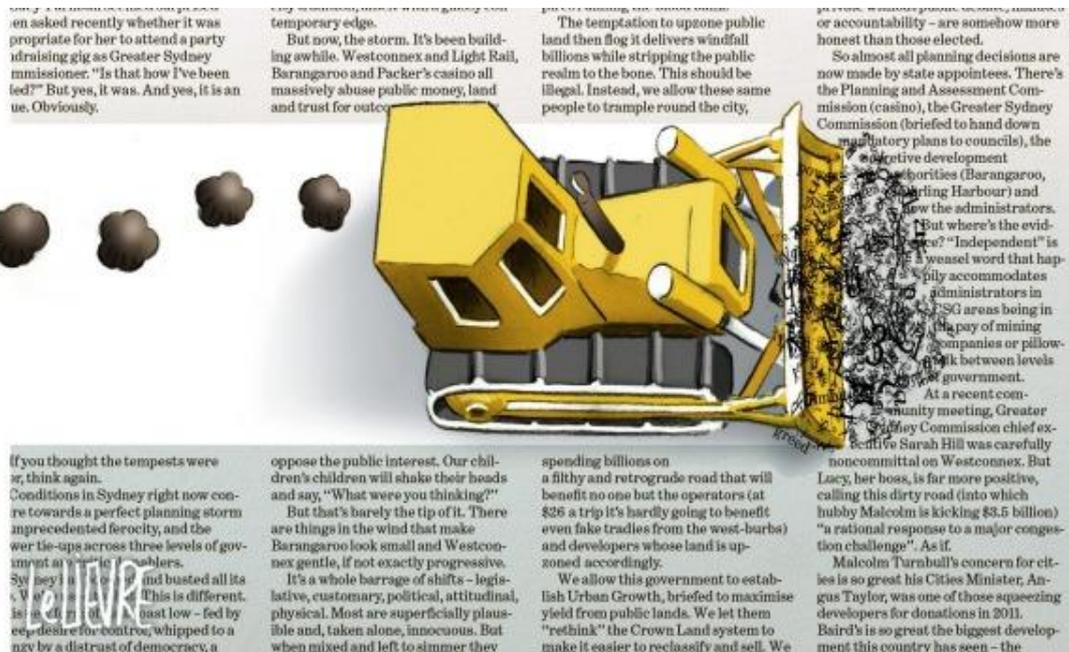


Illustration: Glen Le Lievre

Conflict? Is it a conflict that Australia's primary power couple holds planning strings on Australia's biggest city at two different levels of government? Do we care that the Prime Minister sleeps with the Greater Sydney Commissioner, who sits on the state cabinet infrastructure committee? Or that Tony Abbott's sister is a city councillor who constantly pushes for bigger buildings and a smaller, business-based city?

Lucy Turnbull seemed surprised when asked recently whether it was appropriate for her to attend a party fundraising gig as Greater Sydney Commissioner. "Is that how I've been billed?" But yes, it was. And yes, it's an issue. Obviously.

If you thought the tempests were over, think again. Conditions in Sydney right now conspire toward a perfect planning storm of unprecedented ferocity, and the power tie-ups across three levels of government are critical enablers.



Ready for the mosh pit: PM Malcolm Turnbull arrives with wife Lucy at the Prime Minister's Olympic Dinner. Photo: Jason Edwards

Sydney has boomed and busted all its life. We're used to that. This is different. This new form of east coast low – fed by a deep desire for control, whipped to frenzy by a distrust of democracy, a puritanical hatred of city as habitat and a profoundly macho monotheism – could unleash on Sydney a destructive power we've never in our darkest moments imagined.

There are two kinds of city. Through most of history, "city" has meant a place of symbolic as well as physical resonance, a place for all to dwell, worship, work and play in relative security; the source of noble ideals of citizenship. For a brief 50 years, post-WWII, that flipped. The modernist city was a business-only high-rise masculinist monoculture surrounded by a sprawl of domesticity. A money machine.

This modern city-dreaming – which Prince Charles famously dubbed as more damaging than the Luftwaffe – left Sydney mostly, miraculously intact. At a local level, we were surprisingly quick to value this. Ever since George Clarke's brilliant plan of 1971, the city council has been inching back to that vibrant, sheltering city tradition, albeit with a glassy contemporary edge.

But now, the storm. It's been building awhile. Westconnex and Light Rail, Barangaroo and Packer's casino all massively abuse public money, land and trust for outcomes that directly oppose the public interest. Our children's children will shake their heads and say, what were you thinking?

But that's barely the tip of it. There are things in the wind that make Barangaroo look small and Westconnex gentle, if not exactly progressive.

It's a whole barrage of shifts – legislative, customary, political, attitudinal, physical. Most are superficially plausible and, taken alone, innocuous. But when mixed and left to simmer they form a potion of unforeseen toxicity.

The new strata-title legislation, for example, promising to "modernise" the system, reduces the decision-making majority to 75 per cent. Fine, you say. Stop people holding out unreasonably. But in practice it'll mean if you do hold out – say you want to keep living in your apartment – you can be forced out, with only bare minimum compensation.

Combine this with the government's "value capture" proposals that entail mass high-density re-zonings around transport nodes – which also seems reasonable in itself – and you have a huge leg-up for investors over live-in owners. Developers will pick the eyes out of Sydney like a destruction of crows.

Or mix the government's traditional exemption from planning controls with Mike Baird's asset-stripping mindset (where every public asset is a development site) and suddenly we have vampires running the blood bank.

The temptation to upzone public land then flog it delivers windfall billions while stripping the public realm to the bone. This should be illegal. Instead, we allow these same people to trample round the city, spending billions on a filthy and retrograde road that will benefit no one but the operators (at \$26 a trip it's hardly going to benefit even fake tradies from the west-burbs) and developers whose land is upzoned accordingly.

We allow this government to establish Urban Growth, briefed to maximise yield from public lands. We let them "rethink" the Crown Land system to make it easier to reclassify and sell. We stand by while they license themselves to fine legitimate protesters \$5500. (I was on Anzac Parade footpath, watching the fig-felling, when they put a fence around us and said "this is inclosed land, you'll have to move". It can happen anywhere, to anyone.)

There's the state government's habitual abuse of "state significant development" provisions – far worse than anything under the old Part 4A which Barry O'Farrell pretended to oppose – and, worse still, the unsolicited proposals gateway that welcomed the casino onto public foreshore.

Then we watch as these people conveniently remove democratic opposition, just – good heavens! – for the year-and-a-half of maximum destruction – with a mass-sacking of councils, as though they were the ones behaving badly.

The pretence is that "independent" people – which is to say, state-government appointees who operate in private without public debate, minutes or accountability – are somehow more honest than those elected.

So almost all planning decisions are now made by state appointees. There's the Planning and Assessment Commission (casino), the Greater Sydney Commission (briefed to hand down mandatory plans to councils), the secretive development authorities (Barangaroo, Darling Harbour) and now the administrators.

But where's the evidence? "Independent" is a weasel word that happily accommodates administrators in CSG areas being in the pay of mining companies or pillow-talk between levels of government.

At a recent community meeting, Greater Sydney Commission chief executive Sarah Hill was carefully non-committal on Westconnex. But Lucy, her boss, is far more positive, calling this dirty road (into which hubby Malcolm is kicking \$3.5 billion) "a rational response to a major congestion challenge". As if.

Malcolm Turnbull's concern for cities is so great his Cities Minister, Angus Taylor, was one of those squeezing developers for donations in 2011. Baird's is so great the biggest development this country has seen – the 560 hectare Central-to-Eveleigh – will be completed on public land but with no champion of the public interest.

Underpinning it all is a deep opposition to all things public – public land, buildings, institutions, information, debate, benefit. It manifests most explicitly as a war on the public realm we call "city" and on the public voice we call democracy.

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