

The city is waiting for change

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Rob Stokes
NSW Minister for Planning

SMH COMMENT



MARCH AGAINST MIKE TARGETS BAIRD

Thousands of protesters gather at Sydney's Town Hall to rally against a host of Mike Baird's most controversial policies.

- Council dismissals are authoritarian and undemocratic
- Sydney is at tipping point, but good planning is the way to the future
- Sydney, it's not me: it's you

To paraphrase Mark Twain, recent reports of the death of Sydney are greatly exaggerated. In fact, if there is a demise we must lament it is the absence of progressive voices in the Emerald City willing to offer solutions to the important debate about Sydney's future.

In a growing trend, reactionaries are raising their voices in our town, yearning longingly for a bygone era. A stick-your-head-in-the-sand style attitude is their preferred approach – ostensibly a Carr-esque "Sydney is full" argument coupled with a new-must-equal-bad undertone.

We must plan for an extra million people who will call Sydney home over the next 10 years. Change is coming and our only option is to decide how to shape and couple it with progress that makes people's lives better. We must be guardians of the elements of our city which we love the most – the naturally beautiful surroundings, the clean, green and safe city we enjoy today.

Evidently, for a community not accustomed to new government projects for 20 years now – save for the construction of some sporting facilities at Olympic Park – it can be uncomfortable dealing with the disruption caused by the need to retro-fit the infrastructure Sydney needs into existing communities.



Anti-Baird rally: Protestors gather in Sydney's CBD to oppose laws and policies of NSW Premier Mike Baird and his Coalition government. Photo: James Alcock

Yes, there has been bad planning in Sydney – the neglect of our leaders in the past who thought it too hard or at best too costly to support our burgeoning population with new public transport, roads, hospitals and green space.

Some say that as we age change can be harder to accept. While that is an inaccurate assumption to place on most Sydneysiders, it is those of an older ilk who will remember a city dominated by trams. A light-rail system that some argue was the most extensive in the world at the time – ripped up and concreted over more than 50 years ago. Today, the inner Sydney suburbs previously serviced by this long-gone system are some of the most sought-after within our community.

In an about-turn scenario, millennials have flocked to these denser neighbourhoods, where it is more likely their grandparents resided than their suburbia-dwelling baby-boomer parents. They love the convenience, the vibrancy and the lifestyle these environs offer.

The County of Cumberland planning scheme, which mapped out Sydney in 1948, is oft touted by contemporary planners as an exemplar of city plan-making. It identified our commercial hubs – the CBD, Parramatta, Liverpool, North Sydney, Hurstville, Bondi Junction, Bankstown, Ryde and others that are still the centres of our poly-centric city today. It distinguished locations of present and future roads, railways, green corridors and recreation spaces.

There's only one problem. Since this time there have been 16 premiers. Yet there are projects identified in 1948 that we are only building today. No wonder there is a level of disruption being felt by communities across our city – we are decades behind in our delivery.

If you study the plan closely you will see the route for the WestConnex project, working its way through St Peters in a mirror image of the road being constructed today. In the north you can see a space reserved for a hospital at Frenchs Forest – again, only today being constructed. And there in bright lights is the tram network – today being rebuilt along Anzac Parade.

It's very easy to look back and wish we'd never ripped up our light-rail network, hadn't banned terrace housing for a 50-year period – creating an under-supply of this increasingly favoured dwelling type, or hadn't rested on our laurels for a dozen years after the Sydney Olympic Games, resulting in, well, not much happening at all.

In cities, change is the norm. We should be more alarmed when change isn't happening than when it is. The important challenge is to shape the change we want to see.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/reports-of-the-death-of-sydney-are-greatly-exaggerated-20160530-gp6y14.html>

SMH LETTERS 1 June 2016

Sydney is waiting for improvement, not change

Planning Minister Rob Stokes doesn't get it ("The City is waiting for change", May 31). The city isn't waiting for change: it's waiting for improvement, and by that I don't mean development.

Anyone can develop a site but that won't automatically improve it. Improvement will add value and enjoyment to the city for visitors, residents and businesses. It is not measured in the height of high-rise towers or increased densities.

It will, however, provide more open space, better transport, less congestion, buildings with setbacks (remember those?) and stronger heritage protection, just for starters.

This is not yearning for the past as the minister suggests: it's looking to the future when Sydney is more liveable and less money-motivated.

Andrew Woodhouse Potts Point

Rob Stokes claims to be a "guardian of the elements of our city which we love the most – the naturally beautiful surroundings, etc". And yet he is giving away a sizeable piece of our public harbourside land to one wealthy man to put up an ugly building that will block other citizens from fully enjoying those surroundings. How will that thing in our way have anything to do with "progress that makes people's lives better"?

He should be asking Sydneysiders and their NSW country cousins: Do you think it is OK to give away a piece of our precious land so one super-rich man can make more money for himself?

I've lined up lots of people who'll say no, if he has the courage to ask us.

Pen Layton-Caisley Marrickville

I think that comment piece was Stokes-speak for "let them eat cake".

Chris Brown Molong

Good to see Planning Minister Stokes championing change particularly following the release of the government's Intergenerational Report that outlines dramatic challenges ahead over the next 40 years.

Sydney will inevitably become a different place with a more urban cosmopolitan character. We need planners, including the Minister for Planning, to focus on how to best manage this change particularly for the benefit of future generations.

Chris Johnson chief executive Urban Taskforce Australia

Exploiting Professor Denis Winston's 1948 Cumberland Plan to justifying rampant overdevelopment should fool no one. Were Winston alive today he would be scandalised. Sydney is undergoing the greatest construction boom in its 225-year history. Elizabeth Farrelly rightly listed the government's worst excesses. No excuses minister. "Densification" is the slogan of the moment, what it amounts to is a licence to recklessly multiply the value of sites while, at the same time, demonstrating the reckless vanity of egomaniacal developers. The evidenced is such Barangaroo monsters as Lord Richard Roger's three ridiculously bloated office towers and their runaway companion, the casino/hotel. It's open sesame, not planning, minister.

Philip Drew Annandale

Is there is any way that a premier can be impeached? The reason for this last-resort process is the flagrant disregard by Mike Baird and his government, of public opinion expressed with many of the issues affecting the quality of life and future direction for NSW.

They were not elected to pursue their own agenda to the exclusion of all others, but to enact policies in an open and transparent way for the benefit all the people. Something has to be done to halt this autocratic policy enactment.

Ramon Jones Carcoar

Sydney's population is to increase by an extra million people in the next 10 years, according to Planning Minister Rob Stokes. Sydney already has more people than the tax haven of Ireland where many of the ancestors of Sydney's population hail from.

What is this going to do to the cost of housing at ground level as the outskirts expand into market gardens and the unit dwellers rise higher in the sky?

Rising house prices have nothing to do with selfish Baby Boomers using negative gearing to provide for their retirement. It is "jobs'n'growth".

Charles Jagers Castlecrag

Yes! "We must plan for an extra million people who will call Sydney home over the next 10 years" .But yet again, no mention of support to build more public schools, which are already full!

Robyn Bernstein Annandale

It is rather specious of Rob Stokes to state that Sydney's residents are "reactionary" and "longing for a bygone era". He must know by now that people are objecting to their once-beautiful city with substantial green spaces per capita being turned into an infrastructure-deficient ghetto in the name of greed.

Sue Milos Marrickville

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/smh-letters/sydney-is-waiting-for-improvement-not-change-20160531-gp7tb7.html>