



Bob Day calls for a re-examination of governments' overreach in urban planning, and identifies the financial impact of planning policy as hostile to family life and family formation.

CONSERVATISM AND URBAN PLANNING

One of the major problems with the word "conservatism" is hardly anyone tries to give it a precise meaning. It's like "sustainability" or "family values." A friend of mine was in the US in the weeks before the November 1994 election and driving through Maryland, he noticed an election poster urging support for a candidate who described himself as 'A CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRAT.' My friend was told that the label meant the candidate did not wish to be taken as a 'Liberal' Democrat. The term 'Howard Battler' came to mind.

The word "conservative" originally came from 19th Century UK politics and meant a person who supported the Monarchy and the Church of England. The philosopher/politician Edmund Burke gave conservatism institutional form and a doctrinal base when the then Whig party split over the French Revolution, leading to a Coalition headed by William Pitt. This Coalition went on to become the British Conservative Party.

Outside of the UK however, the word conservative is usually taken as meaning support for traditional values of morality and the family. A conservative, for example, would be opposed to the legalisation of euthanasia, drugs, abortion - particularly late term abortion and of course gay marriage. In the US, conservatives are also hostile to and suspicious of big government.

But there is more to conservatism than just issues associated with morality.

Just as the economists of the mid 20th Century - notably Keynes and his followers, believed in central control of most aspects of economic life, the socialists (together with conservatives like Harold Macmillan) accepted the arguments that urbanisation also needed to be controlled by central government and that the sort of houses that people lived in, and the way in which towns and suburbs grew and developed, were matters which needed to be decided by experts - government appointed experts of course.

That view is still dominant in Australia, and huge bureaucracies have grown up in each State capital whose role in life is to exert more and more control over where and how people live. The 2030 blue print for the city of Melbourne is a classic example of this sort of arrogance in Australian political life. Urban planning bureaucrats within State Governments control the supply of raw land for development through the drawing of urban growth boundaries (and other planning devices), and through the imposition of "development taxes", force up the price of a new block of land on the urban fringes of our cities. Housing allotments now cost up to \$200,000¹ in

Melbourne and more than \$300,000² in Sydney. These prices need to be compared with cities like Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta in the US where similar sized and style allotments cost just \$30,000³. **the cost of actually building a house in Australia has barely moved, in real terms, in 30 years⁴**

It is important to note in this context that the cost of actually building a house in Australia has barely moved, in real terms, in 30 years⁴. The cost of the land to put the house on however has increased between six and ten fold. This extraordinary increase is the consequence of giving urban planners carte blanche to do as they will.

It is very instructive to compare residential real estate prices in our capital cities - particularly Melbourne and Sydney, with prices in American cities such as Houston, Dallas and Atlanta. These American cities are already big with populations of over four million people and are rapidly growing. Houston for example, attracts 150,000 new arrivals and builds 40,000 new homes each year and the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina will doubtless give those numbers an even bigger boost this coming year.

So, why should house prices matter? Because the price of housing profoundly impacts family life, the fertility rate, and the political character on the nation. Until the 1970s the cost of a new house on the urban fringe was approximately three times the annual median wage¹. At this price most Australians could afford to buy and eventually own their own home. The home ownership rate was typically 70 percent. Young couples could afford to begin families in their twenties and the size of families was typically 3 - 4 children or more.

Today many women without children are approaching 40 and are increasingly anxious about problems of infertility. When house prices are between eight and ten times the annual median wage, it takes two full-time salaries to keep

on top of an average mortgage, so having children is delayed until sometimes, tragically, it is too late. As has recently been observed, mortgage repayments have become the new contraceptive. If conservatives stand for anything, they should be deeply hostile to policies and doctrines which are destructive of family life and family formation.

Now that the word "conservative" has returned to Australian political life we should take the opportunity to start building a conservative framework and a conservative vocabulary which not only encompasses traditional morality, but which also provides an understanding of the policies which are causing so much damage to our society. The past half-century has seen unprecedented changes in technology and standards of living throughout the Western world.

At the same time, the burgeoning growth of government and its intrusion into civil society, the decline of individual responsibility, the decline of Christianity and the collapse of intellectual integrity throughout much of (government controlled) academia are developments which need to be challenged if Western civilisation is going to survive and prosper. Of all Australia's key institutions - politics, business, the media, academia, the judiciary, the military and the church, only the military has emerged relatively untarnished by this deterioration in public confidence.

This is a huge political and cultural agenda for conservatives to tackle. It is therefore important to prioritise and choose some particular battlegrounds where we can win some decisive victories. Urban planning would be as good a place as any to start. Because our urban planners have seriously over reached themselves in their ambitions to command and control where and how we live, a conservative assault on the fortresses of urban planning would bring both great benefits to the nation and confidence amongst conservative ranks in waging battles in other theatres of the culture wars.

1 Housing Industry Association.

2 Housing Industry Association.

3 Demographia.

4 Housing Industry Association.

Bio

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