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"The Urban Fringe Dwellers - Are They an Endangered Species?"

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INTRODUCTION ("Phillip Attenborough")

Nowhere is the future more precarious, more uncertain than for the particular endangered species that we are to look at today. This particular species however isn't quite cute or furry enough to have attracted the support and patronage of the greenies or even the media but they are nevertheless lovable creatures all the same. The creature is of course the urban fringe dweller.

The urban fringe dwellers' natural habitat is the outer regions of our cities. Aware of crowding and difficulties of movement in other populations of the species, some have shown a marked tendency to use their resources to create new populations on the fringes of existing ones. The urban fringe dwellers like space - roughly a quarter acre and very much enjoy living where they do. The urban fringe dweller - particularly the Australian variety, is a very agreeable and peaceful creature and not given to civil strife or violent uprisings that so often characterise similar species in other places. Many put this genial and amiable characteristic down to the amount of space that the Australian urban fringe dwellers have been able to put between themselves. In its habitat, the species is happily given to the normal pursuits of feeding, recreation and reproduction.

There is no hard and fast rule as to what constitutes a 'family unit' of urban fringe dwellers. Many such units comprise a mating pair plus two or three offspring but this is by no means always the case and many family units consist of other combinations such as a pair with no offspring, a single parent with offspring, and even offspring living by themselves.

The fringe dweller is indeed a fascinating creature and has been the subject of much study in recent years. Experts have even suggested that re-uniting populations of the species in larger groupings is in its best interest. But is this really true? Does the creature exhibit a natural preference for deciding its own well-being differently to this?

To answer these and other questions would you please welcome to the stage Mr Bob Day.

PREFACE

Thankyou Phillip Attenborough

A widespread belief has developed in Australia over recent years and it is this : that Australia's urban fringe dwellers are isolated, socially disadvantaged creatures who, because of their economic circumstances, have been exiled to the brick veneer wastelands on the outskirts of our ever sprawling cities. The truth, however is just the opposite. It is the urban fringe dwellers who, far from being isolated and socially disadvantaged are the ones who are happily keeping alive that great Australian dream - "A home of your own".

Governments, social engineers and text-book planners have decided, often with the best of intentions, that they know best what is good for people in terms of planning and building. Dare I mention who has a program named "Building Better Cities"? And who decides what those "Better Cities" are?

In the few minutes I've been given today I'd like to do four things:

1. Debunk the myth that urban fringe dwellers are dissatisfied with their lot (no pun intended);
2. Show that there has been a deliberate attempt to drastically curtail fringe development;
3. Challenge the widespread notion that fringe development is more costly than inner suburban development, and
4. Show what needs to be done to protect our urban fringe dwellers from extinction.

1. THE URBAN MYTH

The results of a 1993 Report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (The Berwick Report) into lifestyles of the average fringe dweller reveal the following "startling results", as the media put it. The report found that:

- 95% of residents said they were very satisfied with their neighbourhoods.
- 95% also were satisfied with the air quality of their neighbourhood and had no concerns about air pollution.
- 98% said their streets were clean.
- 88% said they had good TV reception.
- 80% did not work in the CBD but had jobs within half an hour's journey of home.
- 82% were satisfied with the amount of open space their children had to play in.
- 85% were satisfied with the number of trees in their neighbourhood, and
- 87% were satisfied with the street lighting and footpath provisions of their neighbourhood.

The study even found that fringe dwellers **smoke less** than city dwellers. The findings of this study discount completely the widely held belief that urban fringe dwellers are forced, against their will, to the edge of cities simply to find affordable housing and end up being isolated from relatives and friends, suffering from poor quality public services and having to travel long distances to find work. It is simply not true.

One thing is very clear - the people who live on the fringe of our cities are **not** the people who live on the fringe of society. Many are simply exercising freedom of choice and are deliberately choosing to live on the so-called fringe because it best suits their lifestyle, their families and their resources.

2. WHO IS RESTRICTING FRINGE DEVELOPMENT AND WHY?

What is it that is driving these people to extinction? Is it natural selection - some form of 'urban Darwinism' or is it something more sinister?

It is my contention that the latter is the case. A very wise and esteemed member of the Australian Gas Association once told me that, where Governments are concerned, in a toss up between conspiracy and incompetence, bet on incompetence every time. On this occasion however I'm afraid Federal and State Governments have been involved in a deliberate conspiracy to eliminate fringe development.

In Australia all urban development is undertaken by private sector land developers and all the obstruction to this work is carried out by the three layers of Government that developers have to work with. Rules, regulations, huge cost penalties plus an insidious propaganda campaign are all aimed at making Australians, with their long and proud tradition of home ownership, feel like second class citizens because they would like a house on a quarter acre block.

It is social engineering which was unheard of in our parents' time and would have been considered laughable just a decade ago, but not so today.

Let me quote from the South Australian State Government's recent Planning Strategy in which it tried to "forecast" housing starts over the next 8 years :

"Based on a population increase of approximately 100,000 people, around 66,000 dwelling commencements are forecast for Adelaide to June 2001. It is forecast that approximately 32,000 new dwellings will need to be built in the existing central sector of Metropolitan Adelaide."

The Central Sector is described as that area of Adelaide located between Gepps Cross and Darlington. Planned infill in the Central Sector to meet nearly 50% of forecast housing demand over the next eight years. This, after a consistent rate of infill development in the Central Sector over the last twenty years of approximately 10% of the State's new housing stock. It took a concerted effort by many in the land development industry to expose the absurdity - some say mischief, of those so called forecasts.

The effects of this deliberate attempt at social engineering is very real and is part of an attempt to force a whole generation of Australians to feel very uneasy about what should be one of the happiest and most memorable decisions of their lives - the purchase of their first home.

If this current trend continues we will have people being made to feel like social outcasts for preferring to live on a quarter acre block twenty five kilometres from the city centre. They will become the urban equivalent of smokers - outcasts, pariahs, the untouchables in the brave new world of socially engineered, politically correct housing options : smaller blocks and high and medium density communal housing. Those who do bow to this pressure will have been forced to do so by the insidious forces of centralism.

Twenty years ago we learnt the hard way that residential high rise blocks of flats were the worst form of housing one could imagine and right around the world - including here in Australia - those tower blocks were torn down and replaced with single storey, open housing developments which gave people back their individuality; their own space. That lesson seems to have been forgotten. That very simple lesson that people don't just **prefer** space - they **need** it.

So why is it that our taxpayer-funded social engineers have adopted this course?

One of the basic tenets of central planners is their opposition to what we call 'permitted use development'.

Permitted use means just what it says - that those forms of development listed in the local Development Plan do not require Planning Approval. They are permitted. The only approvals needed are building approvals. Provided developers comply with the building code they can start building. That's why centralists recoil in horror when the term is used - it's like holding a clove of garlic in front of a vampire.

The philosophy of centralism, which guides our local, state and federal government planners, is that "we know what's best for you". That's why they are so big on what they call "urban consolidation" or "Better Cities" as our deputy Prime Minister calls it. It is just the opposite of permitted use because it imposes encumbrances on land and puts just about everything you can think of under the control of 'the authorities'.

So is there any genuine basis for the centralist philosophy of eliminating the fringe dweller?
No there is not.

The changing nature of the Australian population and the desires of some, particularly professional families without children have created a genuine demand for alternative types of housing to the Australian suburb of the 1950s. Provision for this should be made, and is being made, in townhouse dwellings, home units and the like and nowhere more so than at the fringe. Fringe developers in every capital city of Australia are now producing up to 50% of their stock as small lot housing. Fringe developers have responded to the call. However, this model should not be forced upon people who decide that they still want the independence and amenities of a new home on a quarter acre block. My point is that the authorities are over-reacting to this changing market with this "we know what's best" attitude.

There is neither a **cost** justification nor a **social** justification for enforced urban consolidation through the artificial manipulation of the fringe land market. As the Institute of Family Studies Report showed, people prefer to live in outer suburbs where modern estates give them space and freedom. One needs only to look at the advertisements in print or on TV for new housing developments on the fringe of our cities to see that it's the park-like settings which are used to sell the homes and land.

A good friend of mine spent a number of years living in the Middle East and has often made the comment that the type of dense housing provision there just added to the 'pressure cooker' of life in that part of the world. Space, he tells me, is part of the Australian mind-set and is evident in our films, our lifestyles, our attitudes and our values.

There is also no environmental justification for limiting fringe growth either.

Those who advocate retaining our fringe land as farms or market gardens have not considered the environmental benefits of housing. Land used for housing has by far the least intrusive impact on the environment. Housing estates do not use insecticides or pesticides or fertilisers to anywhere near the same extent that rural activities do. Nor do they have uncontrollable mice plagues that require strychnine to be spread across the land. And I don't need to mention the fact that fringe dwellers also carefully place their sewerage in pipes unlike four legged rural fringe dwellers who discharge their waste directly on to the ground and pollute the ground water.

The policy of restricting fringe growth now dominates Government policy and yet there has never been any election or referendum on the subject, no-one has ever asked the public what they think despite the fact that this policy affects the lives of thousands of people. Governments and planners need to show the creature called the urban fringe dweller a little more respect. It should be left to decide its own natural habitat.

One of the main arguments used by those who wish to curb fringe growth is the cost of infrastructure. This argument, however does not stand up to close scrutiny at all. And whereas my main theme today is more the social and community aspects of fringe growth rather than economic considerations, I do wish to debunk one or two myths here as well - including the claim by policy makers and lobbyists that fringe development actually receives a **subsidy** which they say contributes even further to urban sprawl. Let me read from a 1992 Parliamentary report on the subject:

"The costs to the community of urban infill could actually be greater than urban fringe expansion because the cost of augmenting services in the inner suburbs is higher than building them new on the fringe."

The modern lifestyles of urban consolidation put excessive pressure on infrastructure that wasn't designed for the two car, two bathroom, dishwasher cum fully automatic washing machine family. It just cannot cope.

3. WHO PAYS FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT?

When discussing infrastructure, I'll refer today to just the 'Big 5' provisions : roads, water and sewer, electricity, schools and emergency services (police, fire, ambulance) -sorry Clive, gas doesn't make it onto the 'Big 5' - not because gas isn't important but rather gas providers are so efficient they can accommodate either fringe or inner suburban development without cost penalty to anyone. Its a pity some of the other public utilities weren't as efficient.

Roads - and by roads I'm referring to main arterial roads. Local collector roads and suburban streets are already fully funded by developers. I worked for six and a half years in the Department of Road Transport (or Highways Department as it was then called) back in the late 60's and early 70's when road taxes on petrol was spent on roads (quite a rare concept these days). "User pays" I think they called it. Nowadays taxes on petrol go into general revenue and there's nothing left over for new roads. There's more than enough money collected from road users for new roads.

Water and sewer - this is a good one. We are told by the anti-fringe development lobby that taxpayers at large shouldn't foot the bill for water and sewer extensions to the fringe. "Make the new residents who live at the fringe pay" they say. But what they really mean is "pay up front". My argument is yes make the new residents pay for the new sewer extension - but not before they've used it! What's wrong with paying for it as they use it - sort of 'so much a flush'? Metered cisterns perhaps? The point being that water and sewer infrastructure can easily be funded by a proper system of rating, however it is important to note that anything less than full cost recovery pricing to users of services only encourages over consumption and accelerates the need for new capital investment (especially electricity and water storage). Making first home buyers pay - the group which is least able to afford a massive shift in infrastructure funding policy up-front, is quite inequitable. At present people living in established suburbs - whose financial positions are traditionally much healthier than those at the fringe, are only paying for the water that comes through the pipe - they are not paying for the capital cost (or depreciation costs) of the pipe itself. Taxpayers of yesteryear provided it for them.

Electricity infrastructure falls into the same category - consumers should be made to pay via an equitable rating system for the capital costs of the infrastructure and then made to pay as they use the service.

Schools are a little different : first we note that there has been a general decline in the number of school age children in Australia over the last thirty years or so and predictions are that the numbers will remain stagnant in the years ahead. The provision of educational infrastructure is therefore one of replacement rather than addition. There is no reason why the substantial amounts the Education Department receives for its surplus land (ie former school sites) in the inner suburbs could not more than cover the capital costs of new schools at the fringe. The only proviso is the application of some common sense by the State Government's land bankers, the Urban Land Trust, in setting aside some of their vacant broadacres for future school sites. At present the Government has this absurd system of selling their fringe broadacre land to private developers and then buying it back at up to 10 times the price. Government genius at its best.

Police, fire, ambulance. Full cost recovery of these services would be inequitable if residents of new developments were charged 'up-front' for their social services whilst leaving existing social services in the inner suburbs to be paid for by the wider community. It is also important for social reasons to maintain a separation between beneficiary and contributor because these forms of social infrastructure benefit the community as a whole not just the immediate area in which they are located.

Policies based on trying to achieve full up-front recovery of all capital costs associated with

new residential developments would not only make housing unaffordable to most Australians (especially first home buyers) but they would involve gross over-charging of new residents for the infrastructure facilities and huge inequities between residents of new developments and those in established areas. Such policies would not lead to Better Cities but rather less affordable, less equitable cities. This would, in turn, lead to additional pressure of governments for more public housing, rental subsidies and so on.

The relevant point of the economic arguments for and against fringe development is not so much **who** should pay for infrastructure but **how** they should pay for it.

One of the biggest problems I have found in this whole fringe development debate - particularly the economic arguments, is the role the various State Government Urban Land Authorities play. Had it not been for these Urban Land Trusts and Authorities and Commissions around the country, the development industry wouldn't be waging anywhere near as big a war against the anti-fringe lobby as it does.

Let me quote from the Industry Commission's 1993 Report on Urban Settlement. This extensive report was two years in the writing and examined the activities of every Urban Land Authority and Land Commission in the country. It said:

"The Commission sees little potential for government land agencies to reduce the instability of land markets or to provide land at prices significantly below those which would prevail had the development been in private hands."

And

"Interfering directly in the workings of the land market is an ineffective means of achieving social welfare objectives and provides no guarantee that target groups will be the main beneficiaries."

I'm sure that comes as a surprise to no-one.

4. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

What can we do to enable our threatened species to live in its natural environment? How do we give our little friend freedom of choice?

First we must remove the Government from as much of the development process as possible. This will allow us to accurately assess the optimum balance between inner suburban and fringe development. Last year alone the Federal Government offered the States nearly \$200m to encourage urban consolidation and reduce urban sprawl, hence State Governments are being driven in part by a desire to get hold of these Federal funds to help balance their budgets. And what is probably the greatest irony of this whole debate, it is the State Governments themselves which are the biggest obstacles to their own inner suburban development strategies because they simply will not tackle the political problem of Local Government resistance to urban consolidation. State Governments spend millions of dollars studying the problem of local government resistance with Planning Reviews and Planning Strategies and Urban Development studies but at the end of the day all these reports end up becoming are just substitutes for action.

Somehow we have to get back into the public debate the truth about fringe development and its tremendous social and economic benefits - only then will the political debate become more relevant. At present the debate is being highjacked by pressure groups and special interest groups who are exerting undue influence on the Government and the media. **Let's not fall into the trap of trying to design the people for the cities instead of the other way round.** No matter how hard the Government tries or how much of our money it spends, Australians will never become city dwellers a la the Europeans, middle Easterners or even modern day Vancouverites. It's just not in us to live like that. People can, and will, decide their own living arrangements.

A suburban house on a quarter acre block is still the dream in many people's hearts and still represents their idea of the Australian dream. It's a great dream and it's a great life and those

who would denigrate it need to be exposed in their mischief.

We must not force the urban fringe dweller into extinction - let's trust nature to decide its fate. If we don't one of these days we will not be calling our new housing estates Chelmsford Park, Kingsmead Park or Rosewood Park but *JURASSIC PARK!*