

Tuesday 6th October 2009

**Kelvin Thomson MP
Federal Member for Wills**

***Five Million is too many: Securing the Social and Environmental Future of
Melbourne***

**Moreland Energy Foundation Annual General Meeting
Brunswick Town Hall**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening. Can I take this opportunity to congratulate MEFL on all the cutting edge work you have done for many years. I frequently seek your advice on energy-related issues, and for example I have made use of your work on a number of occasions in Parliamentary debates concerning electricity feed-in tariffs. That hasn't yet led to a gross feed-in tariff, but as Bill Clinton said, nothing big ever came from thinking small, and I will persist in arguing this cause. Your groundbreaking work continues with the Zero Carbon Moreland campaign, and I wish it every success in the months and years ahead.

Melbourne is at a fork in the road. For a long time our city, its way of life and the opportunities it offers to all who come here has been the envy of cities around the world. To maintain this desirable situation we must act decisively to address the issues that threaten Melbourne with becoming another crowded, over populated, congested and polluted metropolis. Our city has reached the point where we need to change direction or risk our social and environmental future.

Melbourne is one of the world's most liveable cities. This year it was ranked third out of 140 cities as being the most liveable city. Our lifestyle, employment opportunities, health system, education system, infrastructure and environment are all aspects of a community that is the envy of many around the world .

Melbourne is now the fastest growing city in Australia, with thousands flocking to live here on a never before seen scale. The 2001 Census recorded Melbourne's population at 3.3 million people.

In 2006 our population reached 3.6 million.

Melbourne's population grew by 74,713 in the year to last June and by 74,791 during the previous year. Melbourne's population is growing by more than 200 people a day, or almost 1500 per week. Melbourne's population growth last year far outpaced all other major Australian cities. Sydney grew by 55,047 (1.35%), Brisbane by 43,404 (2.3%) and Perth by 43,381 (2.8%).

Our city is forecast to have 4 million people living in it by the end of this year, with annual population growth rates reaching 2%. The outer fringe of Melbourne is currently taking 61% of our population growth. This is placing pressure on the existing Urban Growth Boundary and as a result, the Victorian Government announced it would seek to expand it.

The *Melbourne @ 5 million Review* is investigating the expansion of the outer Melbourne Urban Growth Boundary to accommodate some of the 284,000 new dwellings expected to be built in the growth areas. I have made a submission to this review calling on the Victorian Government to hold the line on urban sprawl and to protect our city's liveability.

A lot of people of goodwill have supported 'Melbourne 2030' with its accompanying high rise, multi-unit developments, dual occupancies, and loss of community say over planning decisions, as preferable to urban sprawl. What they don't realise is that it isn't halting any urban sprawl at all. Suburbs continue to march out onto the horizon. Property developers are having their cake and eating it too. We're growing upwards and outwards. Melbourne is becoming an obese, hardened-artery parody of its former self.

The extension of the growth zone means that the sacrificing of inner suburban quality of life has been in vain. We have growth in the inner suburbs and urban sprawl as well.

We will have more communities isolated from reliable transport services and highly car dependent, as well as clogged congested inner suburban streets. The Victorian Premier John Brumby said in August “I want to make sure that Melbourne doesn’t become a London or a Los Angeles.” He wasn’t talking about population, he was talking about street crime, but his comment raised the question – just how are London and Los Angeles different from Melbourne? Surely it’s a question of size. They are bigger, and that is the key to their crime problem.

Extending the Urban Growth Boundary will undermine our city’s natural environment and liveability. It will totally contradict the original *Melbourne 2030* plan by proposing new sprawling suburbs across land that was originally earmarked to be Green Wedge land. Endangered ecosystems and biodiversity conservation will be placed under further pressure, with new suburbs more than likely to be heavily car dependent and isolated from jobs and services.

Areas being considered for inclusion within the growth areas have been designated as ‘investigation areas’. The areas being investigated include areas in Melbourne’s west, north and south east .

Around the urban fringe in these ‘investigation areas’, we have a concentration of some of the most endangered ecosystems in Australia, including Western Basalt Plains Grassland and Grassy Woodland, and a diverse range of other vegetation types and threatened species. It is vital we do everything we can to protect these ecologically sensitive and important areas from being overrun by development.

I believe the Commonwealth Government should not approve the expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary for many reasons:

- A Victorian Transport Department report has found that there are already 1.3 million spare bedrooms in existing suburbs, enough to accommodate projected population growth during the next twenty years. Between 1996 and 2006 the number of households having two or more spare bedrooms has doubled.

- An inventory should be conducted of development applications which have already been approved by Councils within the Urban Growth Boundary but have not been built. Anecdotal evidence from some Councils suggests that utilising existing approvals would go a long way towards addressing the issue.
- Environment groups have noted that the proposed extensions will impact on rare species such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot. I am disappointed that we have allowed once common species such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot to have their habitat assaulted to the point where saving them starts to feel like hard work. Sufficient of the habitat of native birds, plants, and animals should be protected so they do not become endangered in the first place.
- Environment groups like the Victorian National Parks Association and Friends of Merri Creek believe there has been a failure to adequately investigate environmental impacts, and that monitoring is needed in spring and summer so that a better picture is obtained of which species visit the areas of proposed urban growth boundary expansion.
- There is significant opposition to the proposed expansion by property owners in the affected areas, who are opposed to the Growth Area Infrastructure Contribution, which they believe will cause financial hardship and devalue their properties.
- The proposal represents an invasion of Melbourne's Green Wedges and a breach of faith with Melbourne2030. In 2002 *Melbourne 2030* invaded areas such as Epping North which had previously been set aside as Green Wedges, but promised the non-urban area outside the Urban Growth Boundary would be better protected. In 2005 the Urban Growth Boundary was extended, removing 11,500 hectares from the Green Wedges. This was said to be enough for the next 25 years. *Melbourne @ 5 million* suggests that none of the undertakings made about Green Wedges, undertakings going right back to 1967, can be relied on by Melbourne residents.

Such development will also have serious implications for our ability to reduce our carbon footprint as a community. Climate change is the single biggest economic and social issue of our time. Policy makers on every single front must be working towards reducing carbon emissions to secure our long term prosperity, health and wellbeing. The expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary is utterly inconsistent with tackling climate change.

Encouraging urban sprawl and ever increasing high density developments will lead to a more polluted, congested and unsustainable Melbourne. Bringing millions of people in to Melbourne will increase the stress on water supplies that are already strained, increase reliance on fossil fuels by communities that are on our urban fringe, and it will increase Melbourne's carbon footprint when we must be reducing it.

Regrettably the planning process in Melbourne is not being used to achieve environmental sustainability. Melbourne is generating more greenhouse emissions, using more water, losing open space and turning into a high rise steel and concrete jungle.

Planners and policy makers talk the talk of protecting Melbourne's environment, but their actions have the opposite effect. They behave as Gough Whitlam once described rowers- facing in one direction but heading in the opposite one.

We need an environmentally sustainable development planning policy for Melbourne. We do not need more intense development or more sops to local residents. We do not need attacks on residential amenity through further loss of open space, high rise buildings which are turning Melbourne into Shanghai or Mexico City, ever larger dwellings such as the energy guzzling McMansions or policies which encourage reduced numbers of people per dwelling.

Local communities live with bad planning decisions for a lifetime and it is important that local amenity issues are considered before we continue to concrete the Green Wedges at the expense of open space that allows us to live and breathe.

We need to retain Green Wedges as permanent wedges between growth corridors, not as potential urban land supply that is bulldozed as soon as there is a demand for it.

We get told that population growth is inevitable and that it is desirable. Population growth has traditionally come at the expense of open space. Future public policy must take into consideration the threat which population growth poses to our existing public open spaces. Managing population growth so that it does not threaten the liveability of our city ought to be a priority of Governments.

We do not have to accept over population, high density development, increased congestion and pollution, and the loss of public open spaces, grasslands and woodlands.

Everything that makes our city the great place to live, work and raise a family, is potentially under threat if population growth and urban sprawl continue at the current rate.

We must implement a strategy to stabilise population growth, urban expansion and development. Our way of life, open spaces and infrastructure cannot be sacrificed on the altar of ever expanding population.

We have a responsibility to secure our city's future through thorough, thoughtful and detailed planning. This Planning should not include an expanding Melbourne waistline.

We must show the same foresight the founders of this city showed when it was initially designed – they left us a city with open space, extensive tram and train networks, and liveable suburbs supported by extensive local infrastructure in the forms of schools, hospitals and social services. We should leave a legacy for future generations that we, and they, can be proud of.

KELVIN THOMSON MP