

AUDRC Research Note

Revisiting the Australian Government's new cities program 1972–1975



Was the Whitlam Government's new cities program as misguided as critics claimed?

Background

- From 1973 to 1975, the Whitlam Government actively pursued plans through its Department of Urban and Regional Development to develop regional and satellite cities with significantly boosted populations.
- The intention was for these new cities to alleviate pressure on the capital cities, which were considered overcrowded and deteriorating efficiency and quality of life.
- The controversial dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 signalled the winding back and effective demise of the programme.
- To its critics, which in due course became larger in number as neoliberalism became the prevailing political orthodoxy from the 1980s, the Department of Urban and Regional Development was a big-spending ideological upstart unresponsive to localism and administrative convention as well as 'pretentious,' a 'waste of expenditure,' and a lethal combination of 'ideological and technocratic zealousness.'

Key findings

- Despite the criticisms attached to the Department of Urban and Regional Development programme, several centres came close to achieving their population targets for 2000.
- Moreover, if Federal Government support had been sustained, more may have exceeded their projections.
- The need for a scale of planning requiring Federal Government

coordination, direction and funding has re-emerged. While the 1970s experience was in some respects problematic, Australia could do much worse than a national settlement strategy informed by the aspiration, spatial and temporal scope sketched by the Department of Urban and Regional Development's recommended new cities plan in 1973 given the challenges Australia faces in the twenty-first century.

Links to publications

- Bolleter, J., Freestone, R., Cameron, R., Wilkinson, G., & Hooper, P. (2021). Revisiting the Australian Government's Growth Centres Program 1972-1975. *Planning Perspectives*, 1-25. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2021.1885479>

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