Revisiting the Australian Government's Growth Centres program 1972–1975

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ABSTRACT

From 1973 to 1975 a new Australian Government led by Gough Whitlam actively pursued plans to develop regional and sub-metropolitan Growth Centres with significantly boosted populations following a national strategy published in June 1973 which mapped a national coverage of prospective locations. The intention was for these centres to alleviate pressure on the capital cities considered overcrowded and deteriorating in efficiency and quality of life. The controversial dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 signalled the winding back and effective demise of the programme. This paper examines the population projections for the centres under official consideration to 2000 and their actual growth. Despite the criticisms attached to this 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 implications for a resurgent national settlement policy are considered.

Introduction

In the first half of the 1970s there were serious moves in Australia to embark on a large-scale process of new city building. Initially, under the Liberal-Country Party (conservative) government headed by Prime Minister William McMahon (1971–72) and subsequently and more vigorously under a Labor administration (left of centre) led by Gough Whitlam (1972–75), a national Growth Centre programme evolved. Against a backdrop of enduring interest in the new town idea internationally[1], these moves were the culmination of growing professional and popular concerns developing through the 1960s that the Australian urban population was too imbalanced. The major problems were the big coastal cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, while purposeful regional development languished.

The desired decentralization of population and industry was a longstanding theme of national development thinking. However, one critical juncture from the late 1960s was to link this to more selective programmes focused on expanded and new regional centres rather than ineffectually dispersing incentives across many rural centres. The question of an optimum city size was debated. The other decisive change in thinking was to elevate these concerns to the federal level rather than debate them within the context of the ultimately competitive policies of six separate state governments.

Labor Prime Minister Whitlam was elected to office on a platform which elevated urban issues to national prominence, an unprecedented breakthrough in Australian national politics. His conservative predecessor McMahon had belatedly picked up their appeal in both urban and rural electorates ahead of the national election in November 1972 and established a federal authority to develop a new cities programme. Labor upon winning office worked with this institutional initiative but embedded it within a much larger bureaucratic structure devoted to a raft of urban and regional development policies. Aspirations at a time of accelerating metropolitan growth and the entrenching of socio-spatial inequalities were high.[2] While new patterns of metropolitan and regional growth ensued, the promise of a fundamentally restructured approach to national urban development was not delivered. Some commentators acknowledge redeeming reforms but a lasting sense of failure attaches to the legacy of the Growth Centre programme.[3] So were the original projections and expectations completely divorced from reality?

This paper revisits the 1970s Growth Centre programme primarily through re-investigating the selection of centres, the specification of population growth targets, and the extent to which these were achieved through contemporary and later development. While the growth centres of this era have not been neglected in planning history[4], there has been little retrospective demographic analysis to understand the degree to which actual growth related to the original population targets. The one exception is Lloyd and Anderton[5] who examined the percentage population growth of the centres using 1981 and 1986 census data. Theirs is a progenitor of this paper which considers growth projections for 2000 against the achieved populations for the census year 2001. The central research question, which guides our enquiry, is: to what extent did the Whitlam Government's nominated Growth Centres achieve their population projections for the year 2000? Attempting to answer it provides insights into the origins of and the reception to the programme.

The paper is structured in the following manner. The initial background section sets out the institutional setting in which the Growth Centres programme was conceived and then we explore the main drivers behind the policy fix which emerged. It also provides an overview of the Growth Centres programme, how the Growth Centres were selected, and how their population projections were calculated. In the methods section, we set out the quantitative techniques used to evaluate the success or otherwise of the Growth Centres in meeting their population targets. The subsequent discussion section considers what factors lay behind the uneven results and reflects on population change in the Growth Centre study areas from 1973 to 2001. We sought to understand whether there is a relationship between population growth and some of the key variables which the Cities Commission proposed should inform centre selection.[6] These include the size of the existing population, proximity to a capital city or the coast, available infrastructure, employment opportunities, and whether the Growth Centre had the support of the respective state government. The paper concludes with brief reflections on the contemporary promotion of a National Settlement Strategy.

Background

Establishing a federal framework for new cities

In late October 1972, immediately before a national election, the McMahon Government established a National Urban and Regional Development Authority (NURDA) for Australia. Its main

role was to advise the government on 'matters relating to urban or regional development.' While not formally specified in federal legislation, the intent was to work with state governments to identify regional and sub-metropolitan places as national Growth Centres. Heading the authority was Sir John Overall, the recently retired chief of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) which had planned and developed the national capital of Canberra into Australia's largest inland city since 1958. The deputy commissioner was Robert Lansdown who had also come from the NCDC. The de facto commitment to a Canberra model of modernist garden city planning for decentralized urban development was clear, and Lansdown[7] had already lauded it as an exemplar. The major task of NURDA was to prepare a report on Commonwealth participation in a national five-year programme of urban and regional development by June 1973.

Following the election of the Australian Labor Party to government on 2 December 1972, the pledged Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) was created to carry out the Government's urban agenda. NURDA was re-formed as the Cities Commission. The Whitlam Government decided that the Cities Commission should realize NURDA's statutory responsibility and advise the Government on a programme of Australian Government support for regional and metropolitan growth centres.[8] The Commission was a small multi-disciplinary organization of engineers, town planners, economists, geographers, sociologists, and other professionals.[9] Within the new federal ministry under the political leadership of Tom Uren, the Cities Commission was to act as a 'professional consultant' to the DURD in physical planning exercises with special reference to the establishment of new cities and assisting in their early stages of development.[10]

The relationship between DURD with its sweeping agenda of social and economic reform and the physicalist approach of the Cities Commission steeped in NCDC culture was not always smooth. Eventually, Uren introduced into Parliament the Cities Commission (Repeal) Bill which was to replace it with a Bureau of Cities within DURD. The Act was assented to on 11 November 1975 just before the dismissal of the Whitlam Government. The latter event was a tumultuous time in Australian political history.[11] The collateral damage was the end of the DURD experiment, and with it, any sustained federal commitment to growth centres as the Liberals returned to office under Malcolm Fraser.

DURD's policy targets were varied: urban land reform, addressing service backlogs - in particular sewerage provision in outer metropolitan suburbs - upgrading social infrastructure, rehabilitation of old inner-city housing, urban conservation, and enhancement of the role of local government. Many centred on the principle of regionalism within the capital cities - the idea of lessening development pressures on Central Business Districts, and to encourage more coherent and better serviced urban development in outer areas driven by notions of spatial justice.[12]

To insiders, DURD's programmes represented innovative and timely centralized interventions in the processes of Australian city development underpinned by a commitment to social democratic reform.[13] To its critics, which in due course became larger in number as neoliberalism became the prevailing political orthodoxy from the 1980s, DURD was a big-spending ideological upstart unresponsive to localism and administrative convention. Painter damned DURD as 'pretentious', a 'waste of expenditure,' and a lethal combination of 'ideological and technocratic

[7]Lansdown, "Canberra: An Exemplar for Many Decentralised Australian Cities".
[8]Neilson, "The New Cities Programme".
[9]Cities Commission, *First annual report November 1972 - June 1973*.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Kelly and Bramston, *The Dismissal: In the Queen's name*.
[12]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".
[13]Lloyd and Troy, *Innovation and Reaction*.

zealousness.'[14] Phil Day, himself a state government bureaucrat, argued that DURD was deplorably ill-conceived':

> You cannot administer a three million square mile continent by remote control from the incestuous isolation of Canberra. Your chances are even less if, on to the proliferating bureaucratic bandwagon, you allow to climb a spendthrift array of doctrinaire theorists, trendy but inexperienced enthusiasts, arrogant power-seekers, and assorted party hangers-on.[15]

The case for decentralization

The Whitlam Government justified its programme of population decentralization through several arguments that stemmed from the perception that existing cities were in 'crisis' and that this would be exacerbated by the anticipated doubling of Australia's population by 2000. Most population projections at this time worked with this 30-year timeframe to the turn of the twenty-first century that help define the growth expectations and benchmark the performance for the recentralization of growth into new urban centres. The blueprint was laid out in *A Recommended New Cities Programme* report which NURDA had been established to prepare and which arrived on time by mid-1973.[16]

In the late 1960s, the perception that Australia's capital cities were in a state of crisis was widespread.[17] The crisis encompassed supposed suburban ugliness, overcrowding, disease, congestion, pollution, societal segmentation, and even a lingering Cold War fear of the vulnerability of overconcentration in war.[18] These concerns were not uniquely Australian; the United Nations, in 1970 reported that the 'urban crisis' was second only to the issue of ensuring world peace.[19] The relativities of the crisis were nonetheless stark, with Australia's continental population in the early 1970s of 13 million about half that of Tokyo, the world's largest city at the time.

Nevertheless, one of the most damning critiques was the imbalance in population and economic opportunity between cities and regional areas.[20] The perception of overconcentration in cities reflected an emerging professional consensus that when a city reached 2,000,000 people, the advantages that stem from size were exhausted.[21] While there were some offerings which are usually only available in large cities, like opera houses and stock exchanges, commentators felt that these were the exception to the rule. In this respect, DURD accepted the notion that the significant benefits of a large city, with the minimum of shortcomings, could be enabled with a population of 100,000–500,000 people.[22] Hence, Sydney's and Melbourne's projected growth to over 4.5 million apiece by the year 2000 would compound the nation's 'urban and social difficulties.'[23]

Decentralization proponents believed Australian cities were not just overcrowded but also worsening as human environments.[24] Relating large cities to various types of pathology was

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[14]Painter, "Urban Government, Urban Politics and the Fabrication of Urban Issues", 344.
[15]Day, "The Regional Mirage", 40.
[16]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[17]Goldsmith and Conner, *Resolutions of Canberra Forum 1970*; Llewellyn-Smith, "Canberra forum 1970—towards the cities of the 21st century".
[18]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[19]In Cheung, *Balanced Development*.
[20]Lonsdale, "Manufacturing Decentralization".
[21]Neutze, "The Case for New Cities in Australia".
    Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia: A Survey of New City Proposals and Their Lessons for Australia's 21st Century Development*.
[22]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[23]Cities Commission, *First annual report November 1972 - June 1973*, 14.
[24]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.

commonplace.[25] Of the situation in American cities, Ian McHarg similarly implored that 'the heart of the city is the heart of pathology and there is a great concentration of all types of pathology encircling it.'[26]

The Cities Commission reproduced health data that resonated with such characterizations.[27] Data concerning the admission of psychiatric patients in Victoria revealed that a man residing in a city was three times more probable to be admitted for alcoholism and over two times more probable to be admitted for personality disorders than one living in a regional area.[28] Such health data led the Commission to conclude that large cities had rates for physiological and mental illness, crime and juvenile delinquency and social stress higher than the national average.[29] These characterizations were compounded as commentators also observed that air and water pollution in Australia's capital cities were appalling. Population centralization was identified as the significant causal factor.[30] Some critics went further to portray cities as also a threat to civility – 'morality, delinquency, law and order all being regarded as being worse in the city' than in regional areas.[31] Such sentiments echoed the anti-urbanism of early generations of urban reformers at the genesis of the town planning movement.

Some commentators felt that the capital cities were also declining in efficiency.[32] Indeed, increasing traffic congestion and gruelling commutes from outer suburban areas, became standard features of the mainland capital cities from the 1970s onwards.[33] In particular, the Whitlam Government was concerned about the sprawl of Melbourne and Sydney. As the Cities Commission explained, most residential expansion was on the fringe, and people living there were faced with a limited range of job opportunities or the alternative of increasingly long and expensive journeys to work. Moreover, because low-density suburbs had sprawled so far in the big cities, many suburban dwellers lacked effective access to a wide range of urban services.[34]

Traffic congestion was having a disproportionate impact on struggling outer suburban communities.[35] In line with such assessments, Hugh Stretton offered the idea that the poor were more deprived compared to the rich in large cities than in modest sized towns and cities.[36] International commentators such as William Alonso while not necessarily endorsing new town policies lent support in similarly contending that big cities impose 'role-segmented contacts on people and keep them from knowing each other as whole persons.'[37] Due to the scale and impersonality of the city, 'people cannot understand the forces that affect their destinies and consequently experience alienation.'[38] In contrast, smaller new towns delivered a human-scaled focus for housing, schooling, jobs, shopping, and recreation to thus 'afford deep and enduring relationships.'[39]

[25]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[26]McHarg, *Design with nature*, 193.
[27]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[28]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Lonsdale, "Decentralization: The American Experience and its Relevance for Australia". Widdows, "Country v. City: A Study of Attitudes to Country and City Living in a Small Country Town".
[31]Widdows, "Country v. city: A Study of Attitudes to Country and City Living in a Small Country Town", 201.
[32]Alonso, "The Mirage of New Towns".
[33]Lonsdale, "Decentralization: The American Experience and its Relevance for Australia".
[34]Cities Commission, *Second Annual Report for Year 1973-74*.
[35]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia: A Survey of New City Proposals and Their Lessons for Australia's 21st Century Development*.
[36]Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*.
[37]Alonso, "The Mirage of New Towns", 12.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Ibid.

Growth Centre selection

The definition of growth centres was informed by international best practice such as the British New Towns and contemporary theoretical and policy discourse on growth poles and balanced regional development.[40] Canberra was a benchmark in terms of both the land acquisition and development process as well as standards of physical planning, as noted earlier. Moreover, a working definition had emerged from the work of NCDC urban economist Ray Archer in designating two distinct new city types: sub-metropolitan corridor or 'system cities' (also known as 'metro towns') and non-metropolitan 'regional cities'.[41] The Australian Institute of Urban Studies, formed in 1966, accepted this distinction in championing new city thinking in the early 1970s.[42]

The Cities Commission articulated eight key criteria to inform the choice of centres.[43] First, was whether its location 'could advance the welfare' of other cities by relieving their 'pressures of expansion'. Second, the potential centre required 'existing growth impetus based upon resources, basic industries, or export industries'. Third, was whether the potential centre had a 'satisfactory resource base, the major requirements being sufficient and suitable land, water, power, social and recreational facilities and opportunities, and liveable climatic conditions'. Fourth, was a stipulation that a centre must not negatively 'impact upon the environment of the region'. The fifth was for a potential centre to offer some access to an existing capital city to retain familial links and big-city opportunities through the development phase. Sixth, and in the fullness of time, centres themselves 'should have the potential to offer new opportunities for a variety of lifestyles as well as the expectation of adequate income, better education and diverse culture and leisure activities.' Seventh, potential centres should be 'within the existing national infrastructure of capital investments' and in particular connected by efficient and effective multi-modal transportation links. Finally, federal choices should align with existing state government initiatives wherever possible.

The actual choice of centres weighed the above criteria against several existing places and known initiatives which had already emerged at state government level. In the short time within which a comprehensive analysis and set of recommendations had to be made, the identification and evaluation of centres depended significantly on sifting through this known activity rather than a critical *de novo* application of the criteria from a national perspective. The Cities Commission in conjunction with state governments eventually identified a series of study areas but outsourced the primary data collection on prospective locations to consultants Gutteridge Haskins & Davey (Figure 1).

Economic, social, physical and planning studies indicated these centres were either regarded as having significant potential for accelerated growth or were centres to which State Governments had already politically committed.[44] The Growth Centres programme was a venture in co-operative federalism, meaning a pragmatic arrangement factoring in what the States were likely to accept.[45] Albury-Wodonga proved a happy conjunction of judgment and political expediency. Since the early 1960s both cities had routinely surfaced in selective decentralization studies by the New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian State Governments and the twin city idea was endorsed early by Gough Whitlam when Leader of the Opposition (1967–72) as the outstanding choice for a major initiative in trilateral federalism. However, many Growth Centres considered and later backed by the Federal Government were nominated independently by state governments. Monarto

[40]Hall et al., *The Containment of Urban England*.
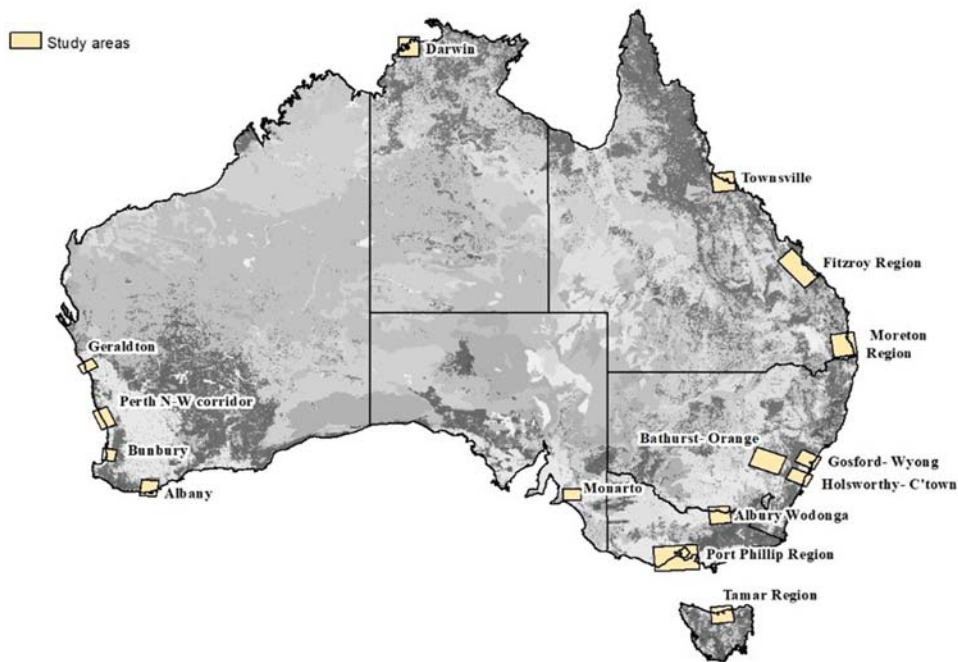[41]Archer, "From New Towns to Metrotowns and Regional Cities".
[42]Australian Institute of Urban Studies, *First Report of the Task Force on New Cities for Australia*.
[43]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*, 25, 26.
[44]Neilson, "The New Cities Programme".
[45]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?:

Figure 1. A federal plan for cities: This map shows the proposed study areas for the Growth Centres programme. Source: Redrawn by the authors from Cities Commission (1973).

(a greenfield site outside of Adelaide in South Australia) and Bathurst-Orange (in central-western NSW) seemed to have been almost foisted on DURD.[46] The study areas in other states similarly had mostly already been reconnoitred by state governments as prospective locations for accelerated development.

Growth Centre projections

The Growth Centres had substantial population targets for the year 2000 (Table 1). Such targets reflected the anticipated doubling of Australia's population by 2000 and high growth rates through-out the 1960s and early 1970s.[47]

DURD generally preferred boosted regional Growth Centres – such as Albury-Wodonga – that could, in time, achieve a population of 100,000–500,000.[48] The optimistic view was that boosted regional centres could, in time, become the mother city of a network of centres.[49] The concept of a polycentric settlement system appeared in the planning for both Bathurst-Orange (with a new intermediate town named Vittoria) and Albury-Wodonga (with the new towns of Thurgoona and Middle Creek/Barandudah). These proposed polycentric structures evoked Ebenezer Howard's polycentric garden city networks –constellations of modest-sized centres separated by generous open spaces – as well as reflecting the 'new town' suburban structure for metropolitan Canberra from the late 1960s.[50]

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[46]Ibid.
[47]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[48]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[49]Freestone, "The garden city idea in Australia".
[50]Ibid.

Table 1. Growth Centres and their existing and proposed populations. These 1973 projections are based on the true official record. There was monitoring of growth potential and later figures used internally differ from these slightly. Source: Based on Cities Commission (1973).

Growth Centre	Type	Census population 1971	Cities Commission 1973 projection for 2000
SE area of Melbourne (VIC)	Metropolitan	127,591	1,639,000
Geelong (VIC)	Regional	122,087	400,000
Albury-Wodonga (NSW/VIC)	Regional	41,494	300,000
Gosford-Wyong (NSW)	Metropolitan	89,000	344,000
Camden (NSW)	Metropolitan	11,000	100,000
Campbelltown New City (NSW)	Metropolitan	34,000	250,000
Appin New City (NSW)	Metropolitan	1,000	150,000
Bathurst-Orange (NSW)	Regional	41,381	300,000
Townsville (QLD)	Regional	71,265	300,000
Moreton Region (QLD)	Metropolitan	223,660	2,240,000
Rockhampton (QLD)	Regional	49,164	97,000
Gladstone-Calliope (QLD)	Regional	35,000	47,000
Bunbury (WA)	Regional	17,779	75,000
Albany (WA)	Regional	12,482	23,000
Perth Northwest Corridor (WA)	Metropolitan	16,000	320,000
Geraldton (WA)	Regional	15,118	40,000
Monarto (SA)	Regional	264	150,000

Growth Centre thinking was based on the notion that publicly owned corporations would be created to obtain broadacre land and to develop and market it. So the selection of preferred Growth Centres carried significant financial obligations. Commonwealth loan funds would be utilized as this would not provide unfair financial advantages to the corporations in comparison to private developers. The development corporations would also be tasked to facilitate and plan for the 'balanced development' of the centre.[51]

Hence, the Australian Government was to provide support and assistance to the State Governments for Growth Centre projects in the form of financial assistance by the provision of loan money including assistance with detailed planning and technical studies for several growth centre study areas.[52] However, the Federal Government ultimately participated actively in only four growth-centre initiatives: Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst-Orange, Macarthur and Monarto, with expenditure mostly for land acquisition of approximately $164 million over four budgets between 1973–74 and 1976–77.[53]

Methods

To gauge the relative success of the Growth Centres, we initially conducted a quantitative exercise to determine the extent to which the 1973 Growth Centre locations achieved the Cities Commission population projections for 2000.[54] Where the Cities Commission defined a range of future populations, we have used the median figure. These projections devised in 1973 were vital for the Cities Commission's initial planning and underpinned the urgency and desired credibility of the entire Growth Centre programme. Despite criticisms of the exercise as naïve[55] even as recently as 2019, Lyndsay Neilson, who was a key Cities Commission/DURD executive was adamant that

[51]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".
[52]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?".
[53]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?".
[54]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[55]Pennay, *Making a City in the Country*.

the projections were reasonable given the national concerns shared at that time about over-concentration of population.[56]

To evaluate such claims, we conducted an evaluative research method, in which researchers compare a real phenomenon or practice and an ideal or abstract condition. Researchers typically use evaluations to measure current conditions or outcomes (of an action, form, programme or practice) against a predetermined standard.[57] The challenge for the team in conducting this evaluative exercise was to compare the Cities Commission growth projections for areas that are not coterminous with the spatial units (statistical areas) that the Australian Bureau of Statistics now defines to provide census data geographically. Nonetheless, we achieved relative parity by using a variety of Australian Bureau of Statistics spatial units to conform – as close as possible – to the Cities Commission identified areas.[58]

Results

Our analysis of population data reveals that, by the census year of 2001, many of the Growth Centres had grown substantially – and in some cases exceeded their growth projection (e.g. Perth's north-west corridor). Indeed, on average, the regional Growth Centres achieved 66% of the population targets and the metropolitan Growth Centres an average of 61% (Figure 2). Of course, isolated and aborted new city attempts, such as Monarto and Appin New City south of Sydney, weigh heavily on such averages.

Moreover, the increase in population between 1973 and 2001 in many of the Growth Centres was significant in sheer numbers (Figure 3). The greatest population growth occurred in metropolitan Growth Centres adjacent to Australia's burgeoning state capital cities, such as the Moreton region built around the extended Brisbane metropolitan area to include the Gold and Sunshine Coasts. Conversely, there was modest growth in regional Growth Centres such as Albury-Wodonga. Reflecting this, the metropolitan Growth Centres grew on average by around 420,000 people and the regional Growth Centres by 33,000 between 1973 and 2001.

Our results suggest that the populating of the range of prospective Growth Centres was more successful than often regarded. Moreover, these figures are impressive, given the very short lifespan of the Cities Commission/DURD. The projection-actuality gap also needs to be appreciated within the national context. Population projections at the time the Cities Commission was developing the Growth Centres programme indicated Australia would reach a population of 28 million by 2000, yet ultimately this was much less at around 19 million. That on average two thirds of aggregate projections were achieved makes it possible to suggest that if the involvement and assistance of the Federal Government had been sustained over a longer period, more of the Growth Centres might have achieved their population projections. Nevertheless, there are more nuances in the circumstances of individual places.

Discussion

To develop our population-related results, in this section we discuss the growth of Growth Centre study areas from the early 1970s on a state-by-state basis. To provide a broader context to the

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[56]Neilson, Interview with D Nichols and R Freestone.
[57]Swaffield and Deming, *Landscape Architecture Research*.
[58]We have excluded the Sydney metropolitan Growth centre of Holsworthy- Campbelltown because the study area denoted by the Cities Commission is unable to be related to existing statistical boundaries. We also omitted the Tamar Region Growth Centre because the lack of a population projection (Cities Commission, 1973b).
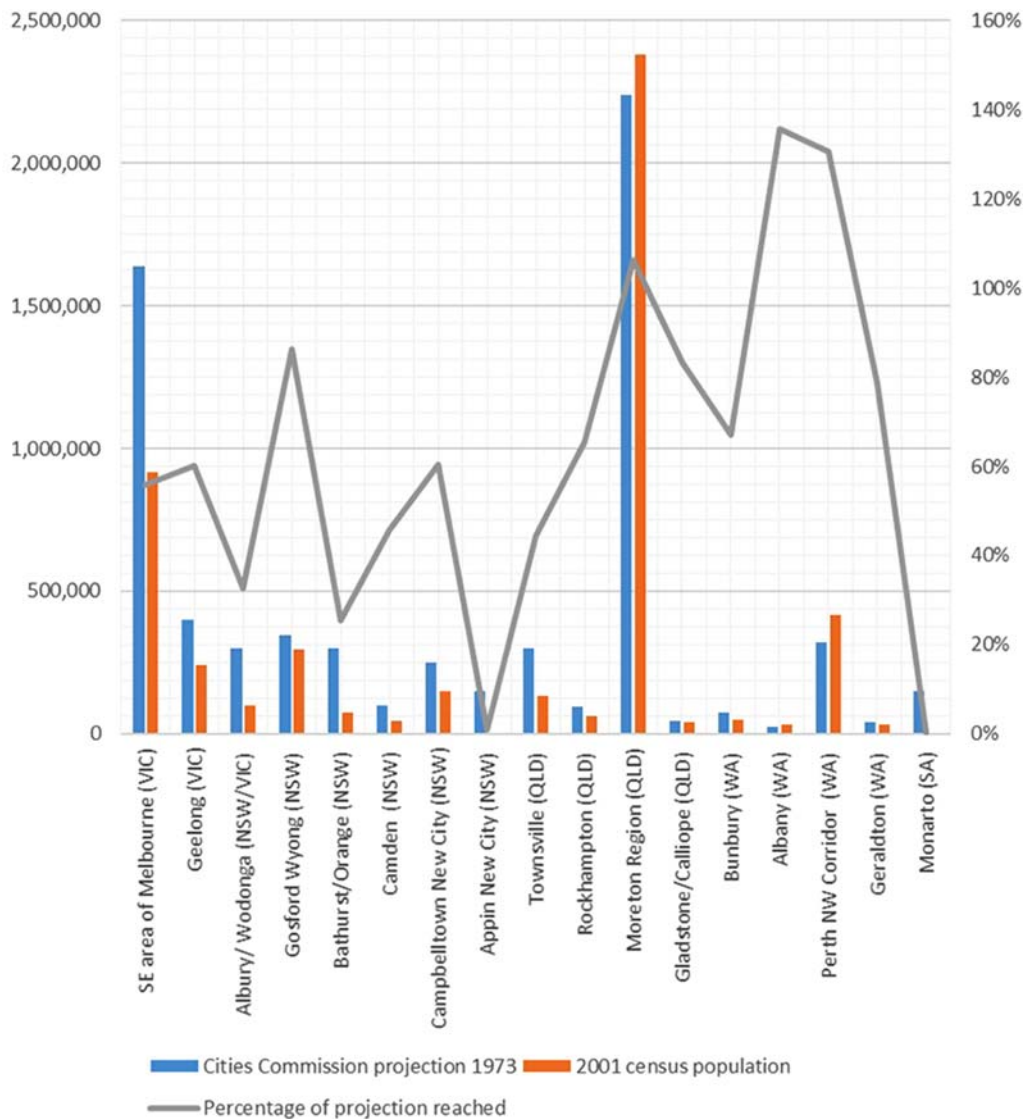
Figure 2. The bar graph shows the Cities Commission population projection from 1973 for the year 2000 compared to the actual population achieved and recorded in the 2001 census. The line graph shows the percentage of the Cities Commission projection realized. Source: Authors.

results, the discussion of the respective Growth Centres acknowledges some post-2000 circumstances. Subsequently, we further discuss our findings by considering larger factors correlated with differential rates of population growth between 1973 and 2001.

Victoria

The projected and realized populations of the Victorian Growth Centres are shown in Figure 4. Ultimately the south-east area of Melbourne and the Geelong region experienced approximately half the growth projected by the Cities Commission for 2000. Nonetheless, the population increases were
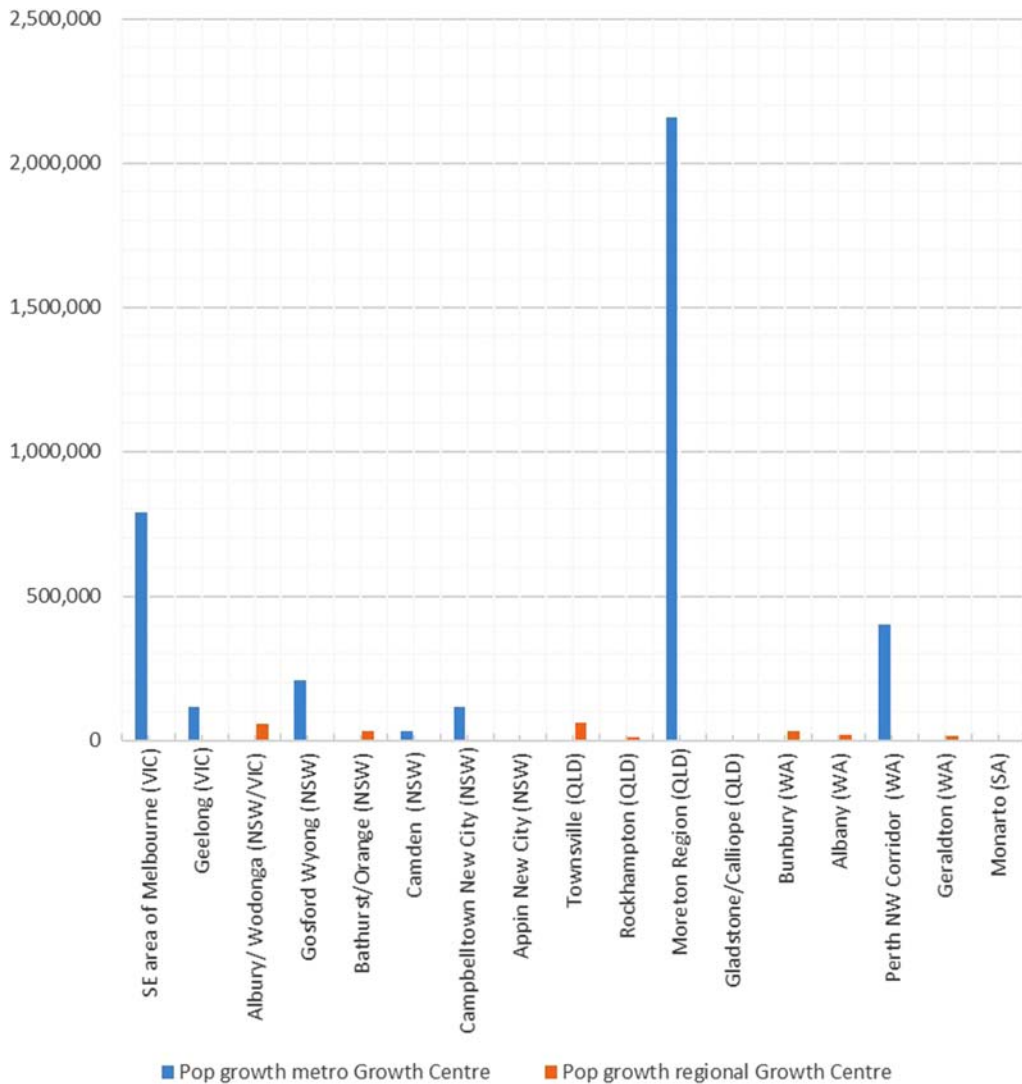
Figure 3. The bar graph shows the increase in population of the Growth Centres between the 1971 and 2001 census populations. Source: Authors.

steady if not substantial. The failure of these areas to reach their targets has been partly attributed to the fact that the Victorian State Government 'was not interested' in engaging with the Common-wealth Government.[59] Nonetheless, in-time the south-east region became a focus of State Government planning for population growth.[60] Federal money allocated to Geelong was never expended because of political disagreements with the state government. Geelong still became the focus of an integrated regional planning exercise and much more recently federally-supported 'fast rail projects' aimed at improving inter-regional connectivity.[61] Recently, the Federal Government negotiated a

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[59]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?", 7.
[60]Victorian State Government, *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050*.
[61]Australian Government, *Our plan for population, migration and better cities*, 24.
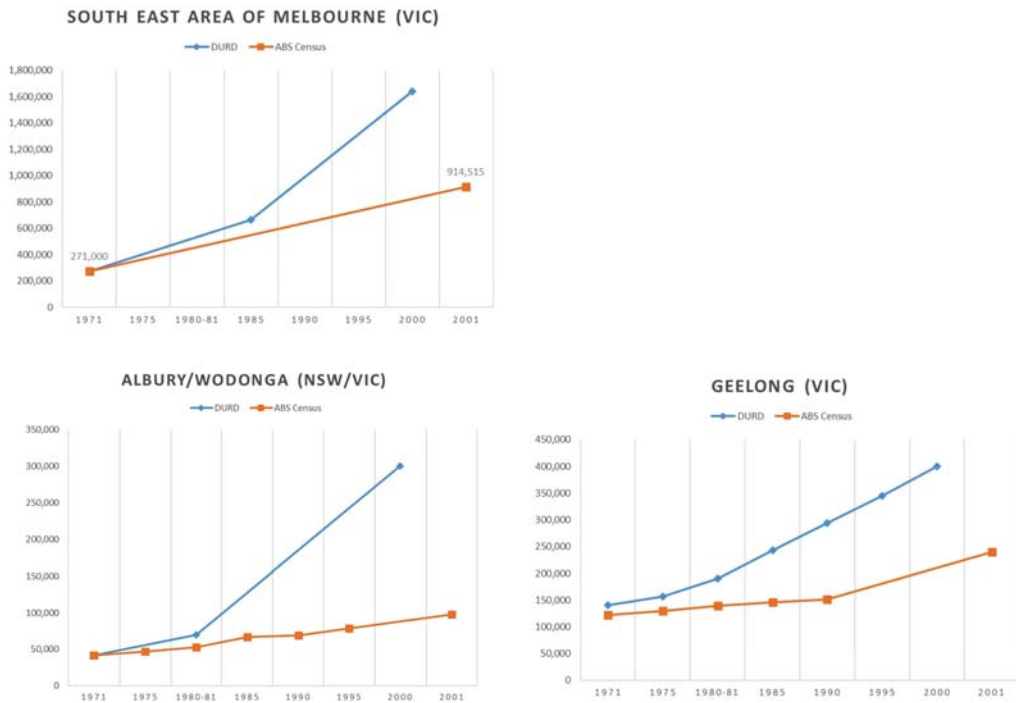
Figure 4. These graphs show the Cities Commission population projections versus census data for the Victorian growth centres. Source: Authors.

'City Deal' for Geelong which includes 'setting a plan for the future of a city and then aligning policy and investments across all levels of government' to boost well-planned growth.[62]

Albury-Wodonga is a twin city located astride the Murray River, the Victorian-NSW state boundary. It attracted over 60% of the $164 million in Growth Centre funding between 1973 and 1977.[63] Yet Albury-Wodonga reached only one-third of its population projection by 2000. Nonetheless, it is considered the most successful regional Growth Centre[64] even if something of an 'embattled survivor.'[65] Albury-Wodonga's relative success is attributable to its Development Corporation (disestablished in 1995) which 'generally played a pragmatic, low-key role, playing down its federal and philosophical origins and developing effective relationships with State Governments.'[66] Moreover, major industries chose the location as a base for their operations[67] in part due to its proximity to the major inland road and rail transport routes between Australia's two largest cities.[68] In time Albury-Wodonga has also become another key node in the Federal Government's fast rail uplift to improve regional connectivity with capital cities.[69]

[62]Ibid.
[63]Freestone, *Back to the future*.
[64]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?".
[65]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2", 202.
[66]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?".
[67]Ibid.
[68]Rushman, "Towards New Cities in Australia".
[69]Australian Government, *Our Plan for Population, Migration and Better Cities*, Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?"

New South Wales

The projected and realized populations of the NSW Growth Centres are shown in Figure 5. The sub-metropolitan centres of Gosford-Wyong and Campbelltown within the commuting shed of Greater Sydney grew relatively strongly[70] with Gosford-Wyong almost reaching its projection for 2000 and Campbelltown reaching two-thirds of its projection. The emergence of what became known as the Macarthur region (which includes Campbelltown) in the 1980s was one of the 'most successful ventures … in the planned extension of Australia's bulging metropolitan areas.'[71] The Macarthur Development Corporation was a vital player with its role gradually shifting from public developer to facilitator of private development before being abolished in the late 1980s.[72] By the 2010s Campbelltown had been designated a 'metropolitan city cluster' by the new Greater Sydney Commission and Camden was also included in the 'Western Sydney City Deal' between Federal State and Local Governments to advance coordinated metropolitan planning and infrastructure development.[73] All benefited from their proximity to Sydney.[74] The only failure was Appin New City which never really got past the drawing board being overshadowed by the larger Macarthur initiative to the north. As a comfortably small fringe community constrained by natural conservation and heritage issues, accelerated development has only come belatedly in the wake of the NSW Government's COVID-19 fast track development programme. This programme is delivering funding for community infrastructure and is enabling rapid assessments of state significant developments, in some cases by the planning minister.[75] Regardless, the story of the NSW metropolitan Growth Centres was generally positive.

The growth levels envisaged for the regional Bathurst-Orange Growth Centre proved unrealistic as most neutral commentators predicted[76] and its 2001 population was only approximately one-quarter of the projection. The proposed new city between Bathurst-Orange for which a significant land bank was acquired quickly turned into a pipedream.[77] Bathurst-Orange was given Growth Centre status for political reasons to reward the NSW Government's agreement to participate in the Albury-Wodonga scheme.[78] After a rocky history, the Bathurst-Orange Development Corporation in serious debt was dismantled in the 1980s, and much of the land acquired was sold back to farmers.[79]

Queensland

The projected and realized populations of the Queensland Growth Centre contenders are shown in Figure 6. The Moreton Region achieved its population projection in part because of the rapid growth of Brisbane, Australia's third-largest capital city. The prospective Queensland regional centres also grew in population substantially. Indeed, some of the most imposing non-capital city growth occurred in the regional centres of Rockhampton and Gladstone,[80] and to a lesser degree Townsville. Ultimately Townsville and Rockhampton achieved approximately two-thirds

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[70]Anderton, 'From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?'.
[71]Ibid., 12.
[72]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".
[73]Greater Sydney Commission, *Greater Sydney Region Plan*.
[74]Gleeson, *Rescuing Urban Regions*.
[75]Environmental conservation the focus of $70 million housing approval in Appin, Ministerial Media release. 30 October 2020. https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/News/2020/Environmental-conservation-the-focus-of-70-million-housing-approval-in-Appin.
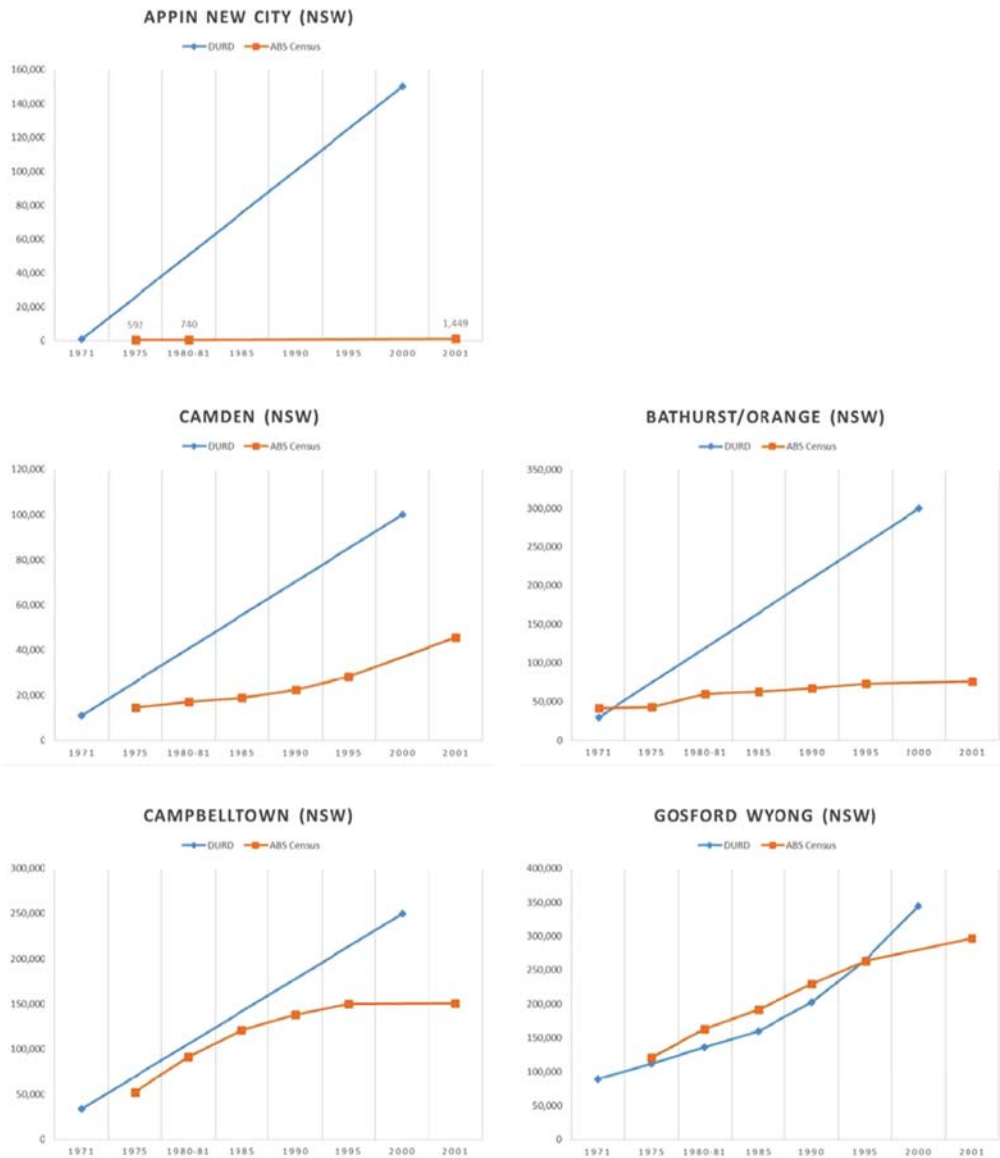[76]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?"
[77]Ibid.
[78]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".
[79]Ibid.
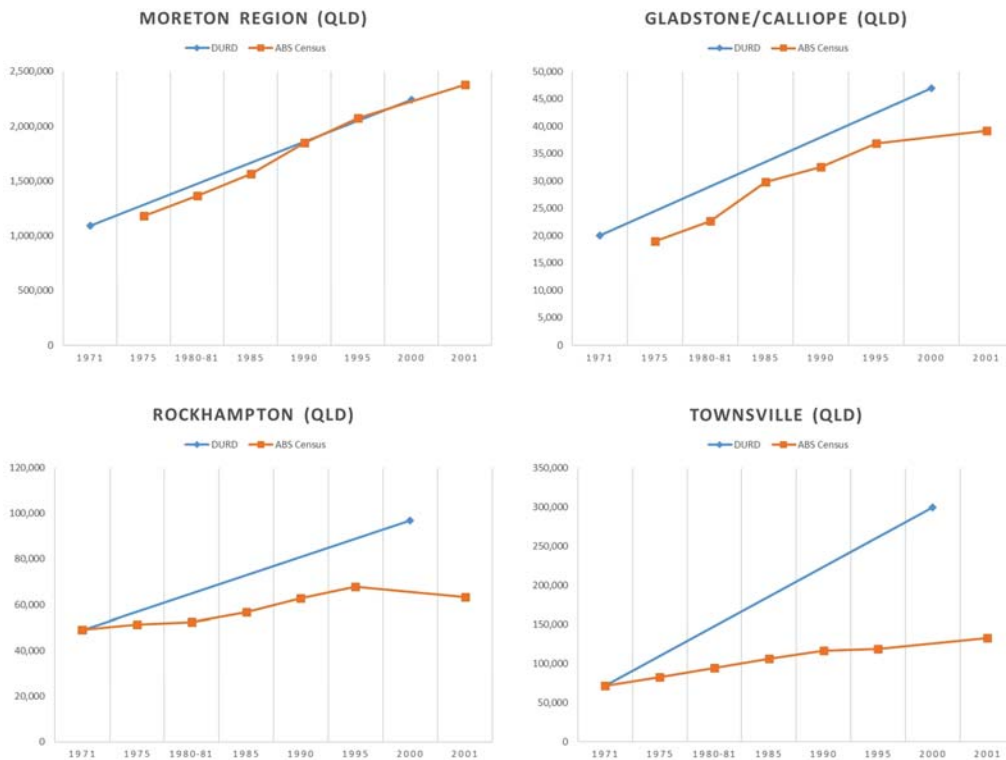[80]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?"

Figure 5. These graphs show the Cities Commission population projections versus census data for the New South Wales growth centres. Source: Authors.

of their 2000 projected populations and Gladstone/Calliope was just under its projection. That no Queensland centre was elevated above study area status is explained by political disagreements between the Whitlam Government and the conservative state administration of Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson, who proved recalcitrant to doing deals with the Federal Government.

Western Australia

The projected and realized populations of the Western Australian Growth Centre study areas are shown in Figure 7. Western Australia's metropolitan Growth Centre was the North-West corridor

Figure 6. These graphs show the Cities Commission population projections versus census data for the Queensland growth centres. Figure by the authors.

of Perth, tentatively known as Salvado at the time, and now as Joondalup. The Australian Government had supported technical planning studies and allocated funding for land acquisition, but with the change of government in 1975 its commitment to this project dissipated and it was subsequently driven by the state government.[81] The Perth North West corridor experienced growth beyond the Cities Commission projection due to new freeway and rail connections, and the relocation of major government departments, with initial development steered by a dedicated new town corporation (1981–92). In time Joondalup became a major Activity Centre in successive State Government metropolitan planning documents.[82]

Of the regional Growth Centres, Albany exceeded its population projection, and Geraldton achieved approximately three quarters of its 2000 projection and Bunbury about three-fifths. All are now designated state Regional Centres, identified for growth in the Western Australian Regional Centres Development Plan.[83]

South Australia

The projected and realized populations of the single South Australian Growth Centre are shown in Figure 8. Monarto had a somewhat in-between status between metropolitan satellite and

[81]Stannage, *Lakeside City: The Dreaming of Joondalup*.
[82]Western Australian Department of Planning, *Directions 2031 and beyond*.
[83]Western Australian Planning Commission, *State Planning Strategy*.
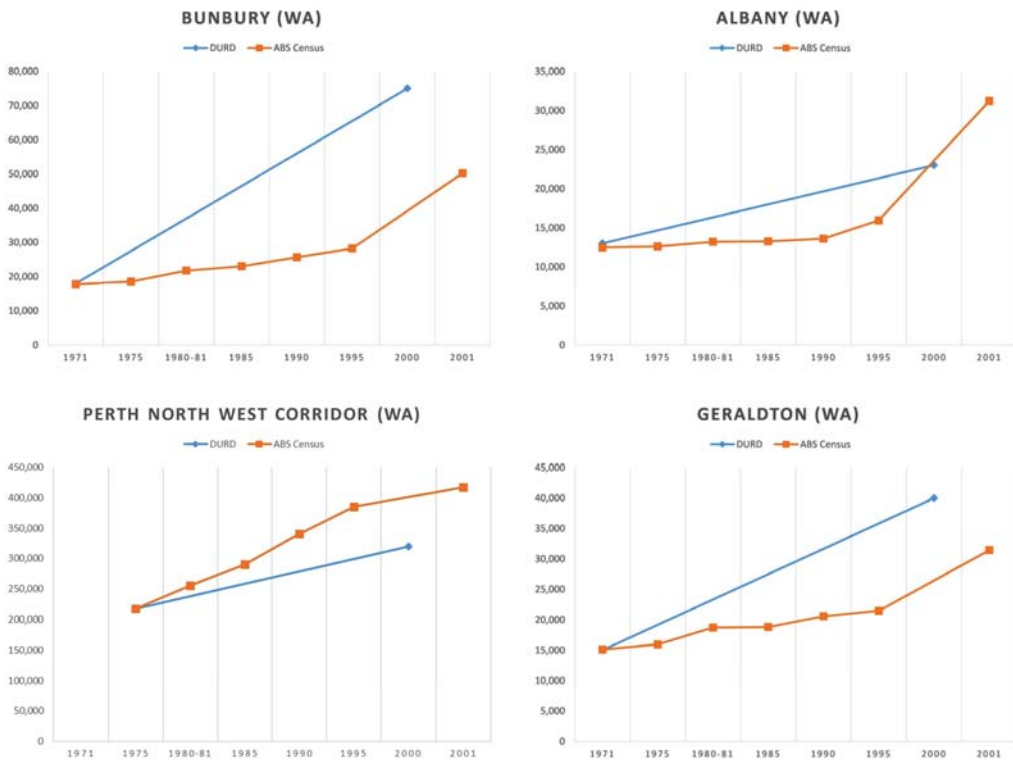
Figure 7. These graphs show the Cities Commission population projections versus census data for the Western Australian growth centres Figure by the authors.

autonomous regional centre.[84] But its primary rationale was to lessen population growth pressure on Adelaide.[85] Monarto was the most aspirational of all the Growth Centres and the major failure. An initiative of the State Labor Government and grudgingly supported by the Whitlam Government because of serious doubts as to its growth prospects, Monarto was to be the only 'new city' Growth Centre on a greenfields site.

South Australian policymakers considered Monarto to be of great importance. They projected it growing to become the second-largest city in the state and a viable regional alternative to Adelaide.[86] Detailed and cutting-edge environmental, social, architectural and urban design plans were prepared.[87] However, the Tonkin Liberal state government, which came to office in 1979, facing an easing of metropolitan growth pressures and sensing popular disenchantment, cancelled further planning. Federal loans were repaid, and most of the acquired land sold back for rural use.[88] The Monarto site is now reputedly the largest open-range zoo in the world.
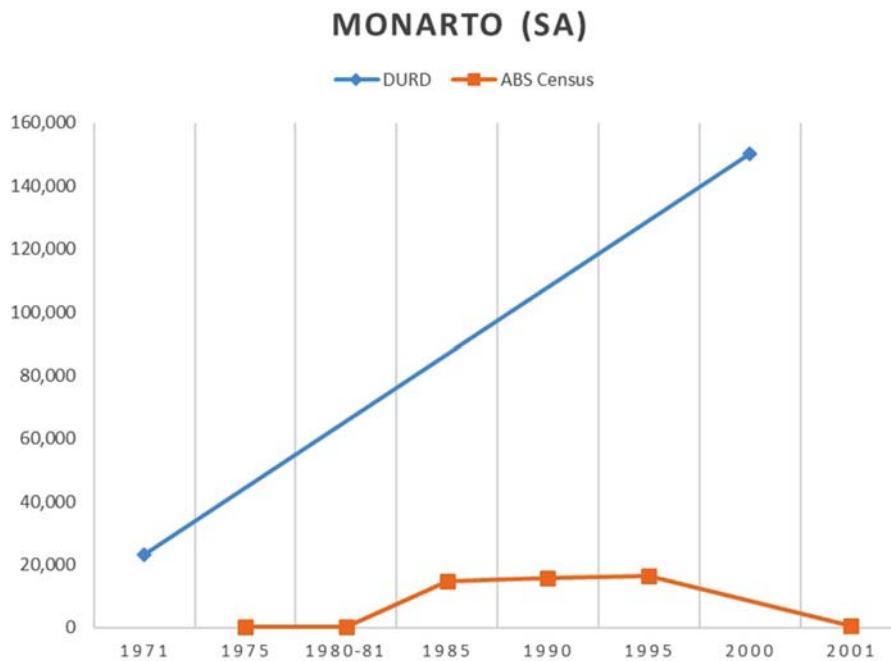
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[84]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".
[85]Wanna, "Urban Planning Under Social Democracy—the Case of Monarto, South Australia".
[86]Rushman, "Towards New Cities in Australia".
[87]Walker et al., "Monarto's Contested Landscape".
[88]Orchard, "Shifting Visions in National Urban and Regional Policy 2".

MONARTO (SA)

Figure 8. This graph shows the Cities Commission population projections versus census data for the Monarto Growth Centre. Figure by the authors.

Key factors in growth performance

The discussion above hints at some of the considerations which account for the varied post-1970s growth fortunes of the possible (and in some cases eventual) Growth Centre locations considered by the Cites Commission. Below we further discuss our findings by considering larger factors correlated with differential rates of population growth between 1973 and 2001. Our treatment is framed broadly by the variables noted earlier which the Cities Commission proposed should inform Growth Centre selection.[89] These included proximity to capital cities and existing populations, economic growth potential, liveability (which we discuss principally in relation to coastal proximity), the presence of existing infrastructure, and state government support.

One significant demographic trend impacting on all centres must first be noted because it provided support for political justifications to wind back funding commitments with a change in government from 1975. This trend was the discovery that Australia's population was suddenly growing far more slowly than it had through the 1960s. The National Population Inquiry in 1975 seriously challenged previous 'crisis' projections borne of the 'baby boom' era and indicated that the quantum of the population that might be redistributed by the turn of the century would be much reduced.[90] As the Inquiry's Chairman himself later summed up: 'the success of the "growth centre" concept (already much modified) depended essentially upon continuing national, and therefore metropolitan growth.'[91]

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[89]We have omitted to discuss the Cities Commission criterion that a centre must not negatively 'impact upon the environment of the region' as such considerations were not a major driver of population growth. Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[90]National Population Inquiry, *Population and Australia*.
[91]Borrie, *Population Trends and Policy*, 21.

Existing populations

As our results show, decentralization of population to Growth Centres was most effective when those centres had a substantial existing population or prospects thereof through a near-metropolitan location. Attempts to build entirely new cities confronted significant start-up costs and the stark challenge that cities generally require a substantial population threshold where the economic, cultural, and social dynamism can successfully 'hold people' and growth can be 'locked-in' to steadily increase population over the longer term.[92] There was also competition from the many other centres not selected for prioritized growth.[93] Such 'new' ventures typically run into a significant political problem: while voters in the area that is nominated may support the policy, there are unavoidably more centres that are not selected.[94]

By way of example, in the case of Monarto, South Australian country towns with high levels of unemployment were aghast that the State Government was forging a completely new city from farmland.[95] They were understandably upset that the Government chose not to boost 'their' towns and were fearful of bleeding population to Monarto.[96] Observed from the perspective of other struggling centres, such new-city ventures 'appeared to be a misappropriation of state funds on a grand scale.'[97] Similarly, in Western Australia, the Minister for Development and Decentralisation in the early 1970s was conscious of this issue. As he reasoned, 'you, of course, can imagine if Bunbury is chosen, the shrieks of horror that will emanate from Albany, or vice versa.'[98] While he believed that in-depth research could lead to the 'correct choice,' the rivalry between new cities and existing centres remained an enduring political problem.[99] This issue was a longstanding conundrum for the Country Party, the Liberal Party's coalition partner in most states, and accounts in large measure for its prolonged enthusiasm for dispersed decentralization incentives because moving to a more selective basis meant picking winners – and losers.

Capital city proximity

The Cities Commission considered that Growth Centres should 'advance the welfare' of the capital cities by relieving their 'pressures of expansion.'[100] Moreover, it recommended that Growth Centres should offer some access to the existing capital cities to maintain social and family links for their pioneering residents.[101] Our analysis shows that proximity to a capital city generally correlated with greater population growth from 1973 to 2001. Sydney's south-west corridor, Perth's north-west corridor and the Moreton region are the three best examples.

The larger and more fundamental problem here was that the Growth Centre programme misjudged the 'push-factor' of the population from the capital cities to the regions. In basic terms, Australians generally enjoyed living in substantial cities, and they intended to remain living in them.[102] As political scientist Don Aitken explained:

[92]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[93]Rushman, "Towards New Cities in Australia".
[94]Neutze, "The Case for New Cities in Australia".
[95]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.
[96]Wanna, "Urban Planning Under Social Democracy—the Case of Monarto, South Australia".
[97]Ibid., 266.
[98]Graham, *Decentralisation a Policy for Action*, 16.
[99]Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia*.
[100]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*, 25.
[101]Ibid.
[102]Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia*.

> It is not any use at all talking in vague phrases like the quality of life or man's ideal role or the environment because it just washes straight off people's backs. The people in Sydney, like being in Sydney, cannot really imagine that it is going to be more pleasant living anywhere else, have no intention of moving.[103]

The resultant absence of centrifugal forces driving population outwards from the capital cities to the regions no doubt took the 'wind out of the sails' of the decentralization programme to the regions.

In the Whitlam era, in all the capital cities, there was also a promise to propagate population growth on considerable reserves of land on the urban periphery already reserved for suburban expansion.[104] Regional Growth Centres had to compete with this market-driven suburban development.[105] Observers ventured that only a significant push factor – such as the capital cities being made unpleasant to reside in – would have made the regional Growth Centres attractive and indeed viable at a significant scale.[106]

While the sub-metropolitan Growth Centres fared better in terms of attracting population growth, that has been at a cost to the relative autonomy to which strategic planning in the 1970s aspired. Growth corridors were increasingly submerged within 'extensive, multi-nucleated urban regions.'[107] As such, the ideal proximity of the Growth Centres to the capital cities represented a not entirely successful balancing act between being too close the capital city and risking being subsumed, or being too far away and risk being starved of economic opportunity.

Coastal proximity

Urban economists have paid attention to the role of amenities in attracting people to cities[108] and the Cities Commission recognized that potential Growth Centres 'should have the potential to offer new opportunities for a variety of lifestyles' and 'diverse culture and leisure activities.'[109] For a coast loving culture, Australians often equate liveability with access to the ocean and its more temperate climes. While the Cities Commission made no particular reference to locating Growth Centres in coastal regions, nonetheless our results indicate that access to the coast correlated with the population increase in the Growth Centres.

Beyond the fundamental economic challenges, hampering possible inland regional Growth Centres was the poor image of rural towns.[110] Urbanites from the cities tended to regard such towns as 'dull, lacking in amenities, possessing poorer educational opportunities, and providing more limited social contacts.'[111] As one anonymous commentator put it, 'there is nothing to do in the country town once the pubs shut.'[112] Such attitudes highlight a key psychological dimension to the problem of decentralization.

Inland locations also conflicted with the long-standing penchant of Australians for climatically favourable coastal centres.[113] Despite it generally being considered successful by the 1960s, Canberra was still often perceived as suffering from freezing winter winds, plagues of flies in summer,

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[103]Aitken, *The Political Likelihood of New Towns in Australia*, 59.
[104]Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia*.
[105]Rushman, "Towards New Cities in Australia".
[106]Aitken in Nichols et al., *Towards the Cities of the 21st Century*, 6.
[107]Gleeson, *Rescuing Urban Regions*, 78.
[108]Duranton and Puga, *The Growth of Cities*.
[109]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*, 26.
[110]Bolleter, *The Ghost Cities of Australia*.
[111]Lonsdale, "Manufacturing Decentralization", 327.
[112]Ibid.
[113]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia*.

and with extremes of heat and cold more severe than on the coast.[114] Trying to tempt substantial numbers of city residents to migrate inland to new or boosted cities was a significant challenge as exemplified by Bathurst-Orange west of the Great Dividing Range and, to a lesser degree, Albury-Wodonga.

Infrastructure

The Cities Commission stipulated that potential Growth Centres should be within the existing national infrastructure of capital investments and in particular proximate to efficient and effective transportation including road, rail or air links.[115] Our research indicates that access to a major airport– as was the case with all of the metropolitan Growth Centres – generally correlated with population growth. Surprisingly, the presence of a major seaport did not, perhaps because by 1973 almost all of the Growth Centres had regional rail connectivity to enable freight and passenger movements. In terms of social and cultural infrastructure, while primary and secondary education was readily catered for, one missing element was a major university. Indeed, almost all of Australia's universities were located in the state capital cities, which no doubt benefited the sub-metropolitan Growth Centres. Subsequently, there was increasing competition to attract universities to regional centres. Bendigo is one such example.[116] Indeed it was regarded that city politicians, campaigning in regional towns prior to an election, had a standard promise 'if it has got a river, promise them a dam: if not, then promise them a Centre for Adult Education.'[117]

State government support

The Cities Commission felt that the Federal Government should align Growth Centres with existing state government designated centres wherever possible. Indeed, it highlighted 'if the programme of building new cities is to be successful, the sustained and combined support of political leaders at all levels of government over many years is essential.'[118] Despite aspersions cast on DURD's relationship building, the City Commission's annual reports consistently express the importance of the 'good working relationship' with state governments.[119]

While the Whitlam Government reached an agreement with the States on only four Growth Centres before its demise almost all of the Growth Centre study areas in successive decades became State Government nominated centres for planned population growth except for the much-maligned Monarto and Appin New City. This situation suggests population decentralization to regional or metropolitan Growth Centres depends, at least in part, on relatively stable long term institutional and political commitment.

Economic growth potential

The Cities Commission was well-aware that the provision of local jobs would be essential to drive population growth. As it explained, 'the Growth Centres Program will depend on the ability of the various development corporations and governments to attract to the designated centres the industrial and business establishments necessary to provide the employment opportunities to attract and support rapid population growth.'[120] Moreover, it expressed a preference that

[114]Rushman, "Towards New Cities in Australia".
[115]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*.
[116]Potts, "The Power of the City in Defining the National and Regional in Education".
[117]Ibid., 138.
[118]Cities Commission, *Report to the Australian Government*, 31.
[119]Cities Commission, *Second annual report for year 1973-74*, 1.
[120]Ibid., 16.

the Growth Centres 'go beyond possible secondary industry activities to include certain tertiary activities producing for national markets.'[121] This reflected contemporary awareness of the structural reshaping of the global economy and the long term decline of traditional manufacturing as the major growth sector.[122]

Except for failures such as Monarto, the sub-metropolitan Growth Centres were able to thrive because they benefitted from access to the agglomeration economies of the larger cities.[123] The regional decentralization programme struggled against centralizing economic forces which were 'too powerful and too fundamental' to be overcome by the efforts that governments had been able to make[124] – particularly for an inland peripheral centre like Bathurst-Orange. The forces were intense for all but resource extraction activities, displaying a historical dependency leading to acceptance of metropolitan primacy as the norm[125] and upon which the new cities programme was the first serious assault. For one, the regional Growth Centres had to overcome the inertia of substantial prior investments, such as manufacturing complexes, which were concentrated in the capital cities.[126] For most companies, a move anywhere would be excessively expensive and highly unpopular with staff.[127] An inadequate supply of labour, particularly professional and technical, in the regions meant that employers who might have relocated to a regional location would have faced difficulties in attracting the required workforce.[128] Relocating government offices from the capital cities provided a spurt to population growth but was generally unpopular and resisted by public servants. The projected transfer of public servants to Bathurst-Orange and Albury-Wodonga from Canberra, which itself was a decentralized metropolis, was understandably not well-received.[129]

With the decline of many agricultural regions,[130] it is not surprising that many of the regional Growth Centres struggled to provide transformative employment gains. Even the relative success story of Albury-Wodonga struggled to generate the required employment to bolster population growth. As historian Bruce Pennay explains, this led to the canvassing of an increasingly desperate array of economic drivers:

> In time, policymakers and entrepreneurs proposed Albury-Wodonga as a distribution centre serving national and international markets, a global training and development centre, an accommodation centre in respect of tourism, boarding schools, health farms and camps, and finally a centre for selected agricultural and manufacturing activities (including building cars).[131]

Conclusion

This paper has considered Australia's 1970s Growth Centres programme and contemplates whether the population projections were as naïve and overambitious as has often been characterized. It has reviewed the years between 1970 and 1975 when there seemed to be a genuine possibility that Australia would develop a new network of cities capable of developing 'to [the] take-off point

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[121]Ibid., 12.
[122]Fagan and Webber, *Global Restructuring.*
[123]Duranton and Puga, *The growth of cities.*
[124]Lonsdale, "Manufacturing Decentralization", 328.
[125]Rose, "Dissent from Down Under".
[126]Bolleter, *The ghost cities of Australia.*
[127]Lonsdale, "Manufacturing Decentralization".
[128]Ibid.
[129]Orchard, *Whitlam and the Cities.*
[130]Kullmann, "Design for Decline Landscape Architecture Strategies for the Western Australian Wheatbelt".
[131]Pennay, *Making a City in the Country*, 179.

for substantial growth next century.'[132] The idea had gestated through the 1960s into a putative political consensus but proved short-lived as public policy. With the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, DURD and its Growth Centre programme was wound down and dismantled. As Gleeson explains 'when a big ship [like DURD] sinks, it takes everything around it with it'.[133] This abruptness may also have discouraged a measured assessment of its Growth Centres policy.

With the benefit of 15 years hindsight, Lloyd and Anderton concluded that, even acknowledging errors (like Monarto) and the differential performance of official centres, the policy was generally on 'the right track', given the circumstances of the time.[134] Our work concludes similarly but with more nuances of greater hindsight. If DURD had endured - less centralist in its *modus operandi*, more nimble in its responses to counter urbanization trends, and with Federal Government funding sustained and private sector investment more skilfully leveraged - the gap between planned and achieved Growth Centre populations may have been closed even more. Subsequently, the foundation for a redistribution of the national urban population could have been made more secure.

The Growth Centre experience is instructive for those pursuing a vision of population decentralization because it cautions against boosting centres without proximity to the coast, existing capital cities and substantial existing populations. The expenditure required of both public and private sectors is prodigious if substantive redistribution is to be pursued. The short life of DURD and the Cities Commission and their inability to implement policies decisively remind us that governance around decentralization needs to be bipartisan, stable and long term in its outlook. As Neutze remarked in the preface to his 1965 book *Economic Policy and the Size of Cities* which was so influential in establishing a *prima facie* case for new cities in Australia: decentralization was 'everyone's policy but no-one's programme.'[135]

Historical lessons from this earlier period retain relevance. A new scale of economic, social and environmental problems in Australia's largest cities – with Melbourne now predicted to be the nation's largest city in less than 50 years with a projected population between 8 and 12 million[136] - makes imperative the need for more considered and comprehensive public policy responses. 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 Cities Commission's recommended new cities plan in 1973 given the challenges Australia faces in the twenty-first century. Decentralization is not 'the answer' to mitigating urban problems.[137] But it comes into the mix. Accepting the urging of bodies such as the Planning Institute of Australia,[138] the Australian Government has now accepted the need to develop 'a national plan of settlement, to provide a national vision for our cities and regions across the next fifty years.'[139] Decisive moves in that direction have been undoubtedly delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 which nonetheless revealed a strengthened population preference for regional living. Any return to the 1970s scale of planning awaits a renewed federal government involvement in urban matters, reminiscent of the period.

[132]Jay, *Towards Urban Strategies for Australia*, 81.
[133]Gleeson, *The Greatest Spoiler*, 60.
[134]Lloyd and Anderton, "From Growth Centres to Growth Centres?", 12.
[135]Neilson, "The New Cities Programme", 19.
[136]Australian Bureau of Statistics, *3222.0 - Population Projections, Australia, 2017 (base) - 2066*.
[137]Hugo, "Is Decentralisation The Answer?".
[138]Planning Institute of Australia, *Through the Lens: The Tipping Point*.
[139]Australian Government, *Australian Government response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities report*, 4.

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