Who should look after the cities?

The federal government is showing signs of getting back into the urban planning business, reports Margaret Simons.

WHEN it rains, Australia’s big cities break. The traffic banks up. The air thickens. The stormwater drains, built decades ago and hardly thought of since, cease to drain. The work–life balance skews towards a space and time that is neither public nor private, a kind of nowhere time spent in traffic, on a railway platform or in a bus shelter. Sometimes it seems that any extra stress – a sharp downpour, a heatwave, a sporting fixture or a car accident – takes the city past the point where it works. For a few hours, sometimes as long as a day or a week, we glimpse a future in which living in an Australian city is no longer consistent with having a good life.

In 2008, the human race passed a significant milestone. Since then, most of the world’s population has lived in urban areas, with the shift driven mostly by rapid development and internal migration in China and India. With 90 per cent of the population already living in urban areas, Australia is ahead of the trend. Cities here generate 80 per cent of national wealth and 75 per cent of jobs. And as Australia’s population expands from today’s twenty-two million to a projected thirty-six million by 2050, most of the increase – if nothing is done to prevent it – will need to be accommodated in cities.

Who, if anyone, can control this growth? Eight state and territory governments and more than 155 local administrations are responsible for city planning. As we track our individual courses between the private and public spaces, the offices, the couches, the beds and the bars, the schools, the offices and the parks, we traverse all the complexities of the city system – the many owners, the many different authorities, all with their stake. These vested interests sprawl from the financial heart through to the pleasant middle suburbs, each with its own lobby group, and on to the greenfields developments on the edge.

Constitutionally and historically there is little natural role for the federal government in city planning. The Howard government shunned it. In fact, one of its first acts was to cancel the Building Better Cities program of the Hawke and Keating governments, with the Coalition’s transport and regional development minister, John Sharp, arguing that there was “no clear rationale or constitutional basis for Commonwealth involvement.” Sharp’s eventual successor, current infrastructure minister Anthony Albanese, has claimed that when it took power the Rudd government found “not a single urban planner in the entire Commonwealth Public Service – not one.”

But now, in what is surely one of the least-examined areas of public policy development since Labor came to power, the federal government is trying to get back into the game. This year’s federal budget included a statement by Albanese, “Our Cities, Our Future,” laying out a national urban policy. It hardly got a mention in the media. A few days later came the government’s population policy. It got plenty of coverage, but only because it didn’t nominate an overall target for population growth, instead discussing how to house population increases in the regions and what might be called the politics of place. “Population change is not only about the growth and overall size of our population,” according to the policy, “it is also about the needs and skills of our population, how we live, and importantly, where we live. Population change impacts different communities in different ways.”
In truth, the urban policy and population policy documents are a pair and don’t make sense if they aren’t viewed together. But perhaps the lack of serious media attention is understandable: these are documents rich in colour pictures and tangled syntax but short on the specifics of what the federal government intends to do, and how it intends to do it.

Yet there are strands of coherent policy, and signs of new ways of thinking. The National Broadband Network will overcome the disadvantages of isolation. The regions must be strong if cities are to be liveable. Communities must be sustainable if they are to be productive. Suburbs built when oil was cheap, women were in the home and the population was youthful are now increasingly unsustainable and obsolete. And in all this the federal government needs to be involved. The politics of place can’t be left to local government and the states.

TWO decades ago Brian Howe was the minister responsible for the Building Better Cities program, launched in 1991 by the Hawke government in cooperation with the states and territories. More than any other contemporary figure, Howe carries the legacy of Labor’s past intervention in the politics of space – and, as I found when I spoke to him recently, he is once again closely involved in the development of policy.

“The rate of population growth and the distribution of the population is largely shaped by the Commonwealth, through immigration policy and through the capital funds it provides to the states and territories,” Howe told me when we met at Melbourne University’s leafy Parkville campus, in the midst of Melbourne’s multilayered, public transport–rich inner suburbs. “And yet the federal government has generally kept out of planning and managing cities.” But Howe believes that the mounting urban challenges are “driving the Commonwealth to a greater awareness of the spatial implications of its policies and encouraging it to work more cooperatively with the states.”

Howe was first alerted to the renewed federal interest in better cities in 2008, when he was invited – along with about twenty others, including the former lord mayor of Sydney, Lucy Turnbull, economist Saul Eslake and other professional observers of urban policy – to dine at the Lodge with Kevin Rudd. Howe had dealt with Rudd years before, when Rudd was a bureaucrat in Wayne Goss’s government in Queensland and Howe was trying to steer through the Building Better Cities program. Queensland’s Labor government “got it” better than most. Brisbane’s inner suburbs were revived by Better Cities, thanks largely, says Howe, to the vision of the Goss government.

Now, with Rudd in Canberra, it seemed as though some of that vision might be revived. Ideas were tossed around, solutions proposed. Things began to move.

In March last year the federal government released the State of Australian Cities report, the first comprehensive attempt to provide an overview of the health and productivity of urban areas, and their likely futures. It concluded that although Australian cities are now among the most liveable in the world, the future could be bleak if nothing is done.

Already, road congestion costs an estimated 1 per cent of gross domestic product, or around $10 billion – and the cost is estimated to double by 2020 if nothing is done. Family lives are being worn thin by congestion fuelled by urban sprawl. The quality of the air, already responsible for more than 2 per cent of all deaths, according to one estimate, is deteriorating. Public transport systems are suffering from decades of underinvestment. The level of car dependency is rising faster than the rate of population growth, making us more vulnerable to rising petrol prices and less capable of adapting to the imperatives of climate change.

It sounds bleak, but among governments and town planners there is a great deal of unanimity about what needs to be done. Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and the other mainland capitals all have plans to increase the density of the middle-ring suburbs by building higher-density housing along public transport routes and in designated activity areas. The aim, which has been shown to be realistic, is generally to build more than half of new homes in existing suburbs.

But the plans are falling far short of their aims. They have been frustrated by the sheer complexity of the organism of the modern city, the lack of good models for retrofitting existing suburbs, and the cheapness and ease with which new greenfields developments can be built, free of the local activism that complicates inner-city development.
Working with many levels of government is a slow and careful business, and these are the early days. The issue is whether a government grappling with so many other problems can hope to achieve its vision. How do we change the complex system of cities in Australia? And can it be done in time?

In December 2009, the Council of Australian Governments, or COAG, added urban planning to its agenda, revealing a consensus that city planning, far from being a matter solely for local and state governments, was an important issue of national policy, needing shared objectives. Brian Howe was appointed to chair an expert panel, whose members include his fellow diner at the Lodge, Lucy Turnbull, and a range of people from government, architecture, planning and the building industry. The panel was charged with devising agreed national criteria for urban planning, and reviewing capital city strategic plans against these criteria. The resulting report is due to go to COAG later this year.

It’s a significant development because all governments have agreed that the criteria will be used to guide federal infrastructure funding to the states. As Brian Howe says, "We have to understand how investment in infrastructure can be reflected in plans for particular spaces – and it’s all becoming more urgent because we are going to have massive population increases especially in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth." To get federal money, the states will have to address agreed national targets for urban planning.

Meanwhile a small Major Cities Unit has been set up inside the Department of Infrastructure and Transport. In the lead-up to Albanese’s budget policy statement, it issued the State of Australian Cities 2010 report, followed by a discussion paper on urban policy. The resulting submissions demonstrated nicely the thicket of vested interests in city planning, and the impossibility of ever achieving consensus. Local authorities each argued their own cases. The Property Council of Australia wanted a streamlined planning process, with a single authority in charge of urban planning in all major cities. The Save Our Suburbs group insisted that most Australians still wanted single residential houses, and that higher-density development would harm mental health. The Greens argued that no additional money should be spent on roads until public transport targets were met. Qantas wanted open space preserved around airports, so that planes can come and go throughout the day and night.

When it finally arrived, the Albanese statement was hardly a big spender. It allocated $20 million for capital works to improve the quality of life in cities, and $100 million to help state and local governments plan employment precincts and multifunction developments in the suburbs, to cut down on travel time. Featuring in both the population plan and the urban plan was $61 million for “smart management motorways” using data collection sensors and control tools to reduce congestion and emissions on major roads.

None of the funding measures was large, and the policy was full of general statements of intent and short on specifics. (Albanese did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this article, and he has not expanded in detail on his plans in public.) Yet throughout the text was a persistent theme. This money – limited though it was – would be spent on “demonstration projects” that meet the guidelines being developed by COAG. These projects would “drive urban renewal” and “show how new investments in community facilities and better planning can help improve quality of life in our outer and growth suburbs.”

To outsiders, the processes of COAG and the federal government seem to fall a long way short of what is needed. Peter Newton, a specialist in sustainable cities at the Institute of Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology, describes the documents that have emerged so far from COAG and the federal government as curiously process-driven, seemingly devoid of any sense that the complex problems of the city come down, in the end, to the management of individual spaces.

Brian Howe acknowledges that he is involved in a convoluted process. This is the reality in a federal system of government, where the states have planning powers but the Commonwealth controls most of the money and governs population policy. It has been done before, though, with some success – and by the same method: demonstration projects that have prospects for replication.

ANTHONY Albanese began his career as a research officer for Tom Uren, the urban and regional development minister in the Whitlam government. It was Uren who first adopted the idea of a spatial approach to the causes and symptoms of disadvantage, tackling issues of urban planning with passion and energy. He promoted the restoration and reuse of derelict inner-city areas such as the Glebe Estate and Woolloomooloo in Sydney. But...
Uren’s wider agenda was frustrated by the antagonism the Whitlam government provoked in the states.

This was the legacy that Howe faced as a minister in the Bob Hawke and Paul Keating governments almost a decade later. The Australian economy was being reformed and opened up to international competition, and these vast changes had their impact in the suburbs and the cities. As Australia changed its economic policies, Howe was interested in the changes at street level – in the politics of space, not least the big areas of industrial land left vacant and unused as the country’s manufacturing industry was gutted.

The Building Better Cities program was first funded – to the tune of $816.4 million over five years – in the 1991–92 budget. Sensitive to the acrimony created by the Uren initiatives, the program moved slowly, kicked off by a special premiers’ conference and proceeding through new, and at the time groundbreaking, intergovernmental agreements under which funding was tied to agreed outcomes.

Spread across the country, the small amounts of money available would hardly have achieved much. Every state wanted its cut, and some state premiers wanted the dollars to flow to their pet projects. To get around these problems, the process selected particular projects and, through partnerships between federal and state governments and private developers, demonstrated how social justice and urban renewal might be achieved through the good management of space.

Federal money was used to remove the barriers to change and make it possible for the vacant industrial spaces of the inner cities to be rehabilitated and reused. Sites were decontaminated; flood mitigation works were carried out. Previously these had seemed like prohibitive barriers to private development.

The legacy of the Building Better Cities program is visible in developments such as the Honeysuckle area in Newcastle, which, as Howe puts it, allowed that city to reimagine its future in the wake of twin earthquakes: the natural disaster of 1989 and the recession of the early 1990s and closure of the steelworks.

In Sydney, old industrial sites in Pyrmont-Ultimo were transformed and the light rail link introduced. Building Better Cities was responsible for the revitalisation of the suburbs of inner Brisbane, the redevelopment of contaminated and disused industrial land in East Perth, the redevelopment of the Launceston railyards and the transformation of institutional land at Janefield in Melbourne into a new suburb.

By the time the Howard government cancelled the program, the demonstration effect had done its work. Private investment, along with some state contributions, was enough to maintain the development momentum. Today, Building Better Cities is credited with having kickstarted the redevelopment of Australia’s inner cities – and all with a surprisingly modest amount of federal money.

SO ARE we ready for another Building Better Cities program? Is this what the vague talk of federally funded “demonstration projects” is all about?

We live in different times, and the challenges are different too. Building Better Cities was about the inner suburbs, and largely about old industrial sites. Now, the emerging consensus is that the focus must shift to the middle suburbs – the spaces into which almost half of new homes must be accommodated if cities are to remain sustainable.

How might the federal government help there? Swinburne’s Peter Newton recently led a research team that set out to provide a model for the retrofitting and regeneration of existing Australian suburbs. Newton calls them the “greyfields” and he can get a glimpse of them each day from his office a few metres from the railway line that runs through the university’s Hawthorn campus. Brownfields, he says, are the industrial sites – docklands, old factories and warehouses – that were the main focus of the Building Better Cities program. Greenfields are the sprawling, easy-to-establish yet ecologically unsustainable developments on the edges of Australian cities.

In between are the greyfields: the middle suburbs lying within a radius of between five and twenty-five kilometres of city centres. Here, housing density is low – as few as eight homes to a hectare – and the houses, built after the war, are ageing as their occupants age. They fall a long way short of modern energy and water efficiency standards and yet, compared to the greenfields, they are rich in transport, services and access to jobs.
It is in the greyfields, Newton says, that we have the potential proving ground for a new logic of urban development. The problems, though, are immense. Planning codes are designed, as Newton puts it, to “manage impacts, rather than to deliver visionary outcomes” and every suburb has its action group resisting medium-density development.

Most development is piecemeal, presided over by local governments and carried out by small developers. So long as greenfields and brownfields sites are easily available, big developers will shun the complexities of development in the greyfields. What is needed, says Newton, is an equivalent of the Building Better Cities program to provide demonstration precinct designs that would involve new methods of cooperation between government and private developers and also new methods of community interaction.

Because the most efficient retrofitting of suburbs can be done at the precinct level, government might act as an honest broker, encouraging groups of owners – ageing couples looking to downsize, for example – to partner with builders. Several housing blocks could be combined into bigger townhouse and unit projects, with renewable energy generated on site, water efficiently used and reused, and buildings put up rapidly, thanks to modular construction. The original owners would share in the proceeds of the development and would have the option of living in the regenerated precinct.

The demonstration precincts would display the best of planning and building, showing that medium density need not mean lower living standards, and that a suburb can be both busier and better.

Newton advocates a single greyfields regeneration authority – equivalent to the existing greenfield growth-area authorities and brownfield redevelopment bodies in most states – which would transcend local government boundaries and have real political and financial clout. Instead of development being spurred only by the sale of land, spatial information would be shared to allow development opportunities to be spotted ahead of time.

Along public transport routes, developments might reach as high as eight storeys thanks to “as of right” planning codes. In the spaces between, precincts or infill might reach three to four storeys, and be mixed in style, characterised by good and ecologically sustainable design and interspersed with areas where heritage values or other factors make retrofitting inappropriate. Spaces that once carried one or two detached houses would instead have two to eight townhouses in mixed layouts.

If Australian cities are to get better as they get bigger, it is the greyfields that have to be transformed. Based on offerings to date from federal and state governments, Newton is not optimistic. So far he sees nothing in the documents put out by government that suggests attention is being paid to where and how such transformation might be achieved.

The research report that Newton’s team recently delivered to the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute warns that if nothing changes, “There is a prospect of system breakdown in key urban infrastructures over the next twenty years, especially for those cities facing rapid growth and operating within the context of late twentieth century ‘business as usual’ practice.”

The report notes the initiatives of the new government, but states that only “significant intervention” is likely to achieve change. “So far,” says Newton, “I have heard nothing that sounds to me like the equivalent of a Building Better Cities program.”

HOWE acknowledges that action coordinated between different levels of government is “crucial, but historically difficult to achieve... Australia’s system of government is not especially conducive to providing the kind of leadership that will deal successfully with resolving so vexed a problem as our future city development.” But the COAG process has placed an emphasis on transparency and national outcomes “in contrast with the more usual adversarial and inward looking discussions between jurisdictions.”

All of which makes him cautiously optimistic. The challenge for the future, he says, will be to make truly far-sighted infrastructure decisions, which will entail not only more effective governance, but also new partnerships between government, business and civil society.
An optimist would say that the vision is developing, that the process is under way. That these things take time. A pessimist sees only process, wordy documents and little action. Meanwhile, the city continues in its chaotic, complex fashion. And when something goes wrong, it breaks.