

Now is not the time to rest on our laurels



Phillip O'Neill

I WAS in South Korea a fortnight ago at a conference in Seoul on the economic directions of cities and regions around the globe.

I was struck by the stark differences in outlook by those who attended. Delegates from the US and Canada were preoccupied with their struggle to recover from the global financial crisis which hit in September 2008. Block after block of houses in new-build suburbs have been emptied as households abandon mortgages on properties whose value has nosedived. And older industrial cities like Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit face permanent decline as steel and car plants close forever, and workers and their families leave town.

Delegates from Europe were also gloomy, but for different reasons. Population stagnation has been a feature of old Europe for some time. But Europe's experience of the global financial crisis has been vastly different to the US.

In Europe it is central governments, rather than banks and corporations, that have taken big hits to balance sheets.

Like in the years following World War II, governments urge "austerity" on their citizens, meaning cutbacks in government spending on infrastructure and on urban and regional development and support programs.

But the message from Asian delegates, excluding the Japanese, is that their nations are enjoying an ongoing boom fed by investments in manufacturing exports and massive urban growth. And the expectation is that the boom will stretch long into the future.

Reports from South and Central America, especially from Brazil, revealed similar growth optimism.

As an Australian, it was interesting to hear the contrasting stories across nations and continents.

It was interesting, too, to hear universal acclaim for the amazing economic position that Australia enjoys, our continued high standard of living and recession-free growth, and our links to the fast growing Asian economies to our north.

People know about Australia's good fortune and are impressed.



WRIGGLE ON: Australia's economic strength is envied, but we've got to prepare our infrastructure for growth.

So it was funny to come home and be smothered by the extraordinary negativity about Australia's future.

What's going on here? Our economic conditions – record jobs growth and low unemployment, rising incomes, the capacity to return a federal budget to surplus a few short years after huge spending to stave off the effects of the GFC, a new funded maternity scheme, strongly regulated banks, and so on – are stunning compared to any.

What is the beef of the naysayers? Perhaps these: a government where independents and the Greens have a say (in the calmest ways), a mild carbon tax, a flow of boats filled with some of the world's most desperate migrants? I'm sorry, but they're not on my list of "Things That Will End The World".

Yet the anxiety that is being generated has the potential to distract the nation from an opportunity to set itself up for the next two decades, and more.

I have an excellent analysis of the future growth of Australia's cities by geographers Pauline McGuirk from

the University of Newcastle, and Neil Argent from the University of New England. It is a comprehensive account of what will happen to our nation's cities and regions as Australia grows to over 35 million people by 2050. They point to the emergence of four mega urban areas that will underpin this growth. These will be Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong, Geelong-Melbourne-Mornington Peninsula, Wanneroo-Perth-Mandurah and Sunshine Coast-Brisbane-Gold Coast.

The task that confronts these mega regions is to manage their growth in ways to ensure quality, sustainable living. The authors say this means getting the mix and location of jobs right, ensuring affordable housing without massive sprawl, and supplying high quality infrastructure. The top priority, they say, is "building connectivity and functional interdependency", which I think means top-notch telecommunications, and uncongested transport systems so people and freight can move rapidly, conveniently and efficiently.

And it's a case of the bleedin' obvious that Newcastle's place as a grown-up city within Australia's biggest mega region depends critically on its connecting infrastructures.

If not now, then there never will be a time when the nation can afford to properly equip its cities with state of the art infrastructure, and steer economic growth to ensure quality jobs in the right locations.

The rest of the world is envious of our position. We are a lucky country indeed. But it would irresponsible – to our next generations – if we squandered good fortune. The key ingredient, of course, is quality government. That's what government is there for.

So write to your state and federal members. Tell them to get a wriggle on. Tell them the time is now, we want better, in a hurry.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Look to God for peace in the climate wars

Compassion can take the heat out of the debate, writes Colin Haggar.

SURPRISINGLY, for a country that seemed to be awakening to our need to be more environmentally responsible, the whole carbon tax debate appears to have us now running in the opposite direction.

In the Hunter we are particularly interested in the debate because of the yet-to-be-fully-understood outcomes that will eventuate whichever position wins out at the end of the day.

People are concerned: concerned whether they will have a job in a few years time; concerned that life as we know it on this planet will be forever

changed because we did nothing when we had the opportunity.

Without a doubt, our children will judge us at some point in the future on our decisions right now.

Malcolm Turnbull was recently reported as saying that those against the carbon tax were driven by self-interest and the bottom line.

Sadly, I believe that this is just human nature. Even my own organisation has bought into the debate, commenting that as our social programs and enterprises will not be included in the compensation measures, we will be adversely affected in our ability to maintain services to those in need.

Unfortunately, looking at things from the human, self-interest perspective will not achieve the common good.

And what would our creator think of this situation in which we find ourselves today? He gave us this planet to enjoy and care for – would he be happy with the way this debate is going?

Some erroneously think that Christians are not concerned about the environment. So what does God require of us as custodians, not only of the planet but also of the dignity and value of human life?

An Old Testament prophet answered these questions for us over 2700 years ago when he said: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Without a doubt we need to act justly, for both present and future

generations. We need to demonstrate more mercy; to be ready to forgive each other and move on. And we need bigger doses of humility from all concerned; humility that is prepared to admit that no one person has all the answers for the dilemmas that we face but together we can work it out.

And personally, I think we will have the greatest chance of working it all out if we are consistently walking humbly – with God.

Major Colin Haggar is the Salvation Army Newcastle and Central NSW Division secretary for business administration. Submitted by Hunter Churches Media Association.



The Lake debate

LAKE Macquarie mayor Greg Piper has drawn up plans to hive off part of Speers Point to create a new suburb called Lake Macquarie, to help give the area an identity. Councillors will consider the plan at a meeting tonight and the plan prompted plenty of debate.

What a great idea. When this eventuates we can say we are from Lake Macquarie. Sell the name, it's a great place to live. Where else in Australia do we have a lake with size and beauty like Lake Macquarie.

Choc

The naming of the suburb makes sense to me, but until every street in Lake Macquarie has kerb and guttering the council should not even consider building a new administration centre.

DoubleStandards

Renaming part of an existing suburb Lake Macquarie is a pointless exercise by a pointless local government. It's still just the suburban sprawl of Newcastle.

Revera90

LM is a collection of suburbs and villages around the lake. It doesn't have a city heart like traditional cities and it's too late to create an artificial one.

council watcher

Great idea. I live here and I don't want to be a part of predictable old Newcastle. Bring on the new name and concentrate on promoting the area as a beautiful region to holiday.

gilli

Lake Macquarie is a region, not a suburb. Please leave it that way and get on with more important issues.

JB

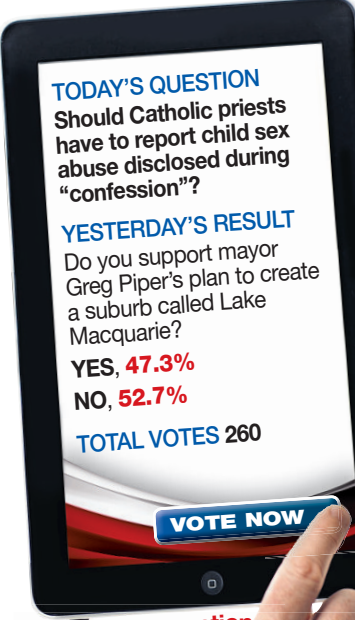
Well it's about time someone took a stand got on with the task of giving the city an address. The city has a Lake Macquarie but no area address. Every town centre has mailing address that carries the area name.

well

Windale should be renamed Lake Macquarie. Lake Macquarie gets a suburb named after it and Windale gets a new identity.

Mr Ed

ONLINE poll



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