

SOS Editorial – Federal Election 2016: All about democracy and sustainability

In the current atmosphere of unprecedented political, social and environmental instability, there are some fundamental issues that SOS recommends all members should think carefully about before they vote in the current federal election.

This is a time when society is being increasingly challenged by an economy in transition and by the stress of population growth, infrastructure backlog, social fragmentation and lack of affordable housing. Representative democracy has never suffered as much lip-service and window-dressing. The major political parties continue to avoid limiting political donations and are increasingly compromised by funding from developers in particular. Trying to meet the challenge of climate change and reduce our carbon footprint while maintaining high population growth and over-developing our green suburbs makes little sense.

These issues are not just local but global. Brexit is just the latest in a sequence of political and economic events that look set to continue and worsen. Similar predictions were made as far back as 1972 when "The Limits to Growth" was released. This set of computerised global scenarios developed at MIT in the US included a "business as usual" scenario that resulted in a global economic, population and environmental collapse by around 2040. The model indicated that the global economic decline would start to become obvious by 2015/16. This is the track we are still currently following.

Computer models come and go but this is one of the rare ones which has stood the test of time. In 2014, the Melbourne University Sustainability Institute fed recent UN data into the original MIT program and demonstrated that over the last 40 years, the model's predictions have matched real events very closely – so far. See:

http://espas.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/MSSI-ResearchPaper-4_Turner_2014.pdf

This research was also featured in the Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/02/limits-to-growth-was-right-new-research-shows-were-nearing-collapse>

So there is an urgent imperative to transition from traditional economic and land use systems to a more sustainable and balanced model. SOS addressed some of the related urban planning issues in a recent wide-ranging submission to the state government's "Managing Residential Development" Advisory Committee. The submission includes links to explanatory documents. For details of the submission and its 3 appendices, see <http://sos.asn.au/vic/sospoliciesandsubmissions/>

The submission explains these key points (more references are provided in the submission itself):

*** Building approvals for apartments in most Melbourne suburbs have surged ahead of projected requirements and of actual demand, an unsustainable situation**

*** Population growth greatly increases the requirement for more infrastructure and services:** <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-huge-hidden-cost-of-population-growth-20160219-gmyddb.html>

*** There is no actual housing shortage, just too many empty investor properties and under-utilised dwellings**

<https://www.prosper.org.au/2015/12/09/almost-20pc-of-melbournes-investor-owned-homes-empty/>

*** Housing affordability won't be improved by building more houses, only by reducing the levers that push up prices and rents - i.e., land banking by development corporations, inequitable investor tax concessions, inadequate controls on foreign investment in Australian property, etc:**

<http://architectureau.com/articles/tackling-housing-unaffordability-a-10-point-national-plan/>, http://soac.fbe.unsw.edu.au/2011/papers/SOAC2011_0228_final.pdf

* **Most people don't want apartments but for many it's all they can afford:**

<http://tapri.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Sydney-Melbourne-Housing-Report-No-2-No-End-in-Sight-6-Mar-2016-std.pdf>

* **There is a desperate need for better and more fully integrated public transport, which can be economically feasible metro-wide, even including the outer suburbs:** <http://www.theage.com.au/it-pro/we-can-keep-our-leafy-suburbs-and-still-save-the-planet-20091122-isqz.html>

* **Road traffic congestion is best addressed by public transport demand-side management and by building rail in parallel with arterial roads, an apparent contradiction known as the Downs-Thomson Paradox – more roads just encourage more traffic**

* **Many sustainability factors are not considered in our planning system**

* **The need for mandatory planning controls to counteract mismanagement of permit assessments and to provide more certainty and consistency**

* **The need for deliberative community consultation in planning policy development and council governance**

In this Senate election, your preferences are up to you, not to secret pre-determined party preference deals. A handful of senators will probably hold the balance of power in the Upper House, which will have a vital role to independently hold the next government to account. This is especially important because governments often introduce policies into Parliament that they didn't take to the previous election, and the people's house of review must be able to independently scrutinise such draft legislation that has no democratic mandate.

There is also the chance of another hung parliament in the lower house. The major parties say this would be a chaotic disaster but in most other western democracies, a plurality of parties in government is the norm, where legislation can't be rammed through unilaterally but must be fully debated with more consultation, more negotiation and more transparency. In Victoria, one of our most stable and progressive governments was the minority Bracks government of 1999-2002, which governed with the support of 3 progressive independents with their Charter for stable, open and accountable government. That cooperation resulted, among other things, in the historical democratic reform of the previously gerrymandered Victorian Upper House.

So – we recommend strongly that you vote for candidates with a track record of integrity, consultation and an appreciation of the challenges above, including the need for a ban on political donations.

Good urban planning determines the shape, the aesthetics and the function of our city. It is more vital than ever that we elect candidates who will actively represent their wider communities on these and other issues to restore confidence in our representative democracy.

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