

THE NEW-CITIES EXPERIMENT... II

BY THE END of this century, there will be a quarter of a million people, many of them immigrants from Sydney, living in the Bathurst - Orange area of central western NSW.

Away to the south, 300,000 will be living in Albury and Wodonga, the interdependent cities which are divided only by the Murray River.

At least, that's the grand design now being drawn up by the Federal, NSW and Victorian Governments and their consultants for Australia's first two growth centres, the nation's most important experiment in decentralisation.

Just how the development will take place is a secret not yet shared with the public, if, indeed, it has reached its final shape in the privacy of the planners' offices.

Take the Bathurst-Orange area, for example. What will the two country cities look like at the dawn of the twenty-first century? Where will the new suburbs be, the super-highways, the industrial centres and the supermarkets?

And who will decide these matters? Will edicts be handed down by distant Federal and State planners or by the statutory development corporation to be set up soon under NSW legislation?

Will the people who live in the Bathurst-Orange area today have an effective voice, through their elected city and shire councils, in the many changes about to take place around them?

The people do not lack opinions on either series of questions, but until the planners produce their interim development scheme before the end of the year, nobody has a detailed answer to any of the questions.

While that situation lasts, growth-centre development is a prospect which excites one minority, appals another minority, and worries the majority.

Mr Evan Phillips, principal of the Mitchell College of Advanced Education in Bathurst, defines the reception given to growth-centre development as "a love-hate relationship."

"People love the idea of improving their way of life with better facilities and more employment opportunities," he says, "but they hate the idea that their present way of life is going to change, and they hate even more the idea that they may not do as well out of that change as some others."

Bathurst today is a bustling country city of 18,000 people, with wide streets and quiet parks, rows of modern shops and a sprinkling of good restaurants. It wears its gold-rush

Grand designs for 550,000 people

By IAN HICKS

in 1967 and keeping him there through two State elections.

Thirty-six miles away is Orange, a solid, respectable home for 24,000 people, built on dark volcanic soils which make the area one of Australia's rural jewels.

Orange lacks Bathurst's history but, as loyal Orangemen are quick to point out, it is bigger than its regional rival and has an industrial edge in the vast Email works.

It is a Country Party bailiwick, held for the past 26 years by the Deputy Premier and CP leader, Sir Charles Cutler.

Forming a triangle with the two urban giants is the tiny village of Blayney, almost totally dependent on a single industry, a major abattoir.

According to local wisdom, spiced with the inevitable rumours, the shape of development within that triangle can be guessed at already.

During the next quarter-century Bathurst and Orange will each increase their populations to 50,000, with most of the expansion in satellite suburbs on the fringe of existing urban areas.

Between the two existing cities will rise a new town with a population of some 150,000 (named Mitchell perhaps?) and built on what is now the green pastureland of the Guyong area.

The three cities, connected by an upgraded road network, will all be within easy distance of an industrial region, at or near Blayney.

That is how many locals see the shape of the future in their growth centre; it will be interesting to see just how close they are to the planners' ideas.

It will also be interesting to see how local government will fit into the grand design, and in that respect only one thing seems certain; one way or another, local government

boundaries in the growth centre will have to be redrawn.

At present, it has two city councils ringed with small shires — Abercrombie, Lyndhurst and Oberon, to name a few.

Many of the shires could not exist economically without Commonwealth grants for roads, and there is many a tale about such-and-such a shire which built a road to nowhere, merely to spend its grant and keep its plant working.

A committee of inquiry, now examining the whole subject of local government areas and administration in NSW, is expected to produce some radical recommendations for rationalisation.

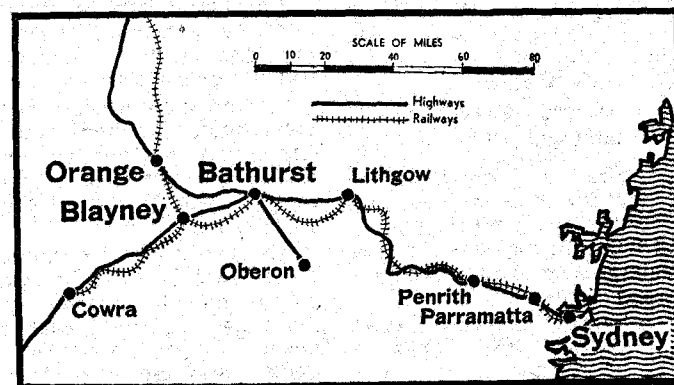
Popular opinion among city and shire officials suggests that a process of amalgamation and abolition would produce two, or at most three, councils for the growth centre.

Such a process should make local government more efficient; it will not necessarily guarantee a proper role for councils in development planning, a point made clear at a recent conference on growth-centre development in Orange.

The Professor of Economics at the University of Queensland, Professor R. C. Gates, told the 330 delegates that there was little, if any, room for councils in the creation of new cities. He suggested that local government should be "put on the shelf" while a new city was being built.

The representatives of local government were, predictably, horrified. When the meeting broke up, it left behind it a motion "deploring any suggestion that the advice of local government be suspended during the planning and development stages of new growth centres."

"It may seem easier to have an authority which Professor Gates described as 'thick-skinned'," said the Mayor of



Orange, Alderman F. S. Dobbin. "However, in reality he is advocating an authority that could ride roughshod over local government bodies."

It seems quite obvious that the NSW Government will not attempt to exclude local government completely from growth-centre planning and management, certainly not while the MLA for Orange is also the Minister for Local Government.

So how does local government see its future role?

Mr Alan Morse is an accountant, a former Mayor of Bathurst and a former president, country vice-president and executive member of the Local Government Association of NSW. He told the Orange conference that any growth centre had to be related to national strategies, with many of its policy issues determined at State level.

However, he said, there would be services and functions for which councils would be responsible and which were better discharged at the local level; among them were roads, parks, playing fields, water and sewerage, power distribution and libraries.

In addition, local government was responsible for the provision of "democratic representative government at the grass roots..."

"The council will have to consider, continually, all developments in relation to their effects on the centre, and it must be prepared to fight for the interests of the area against both State and national

interests, if necessary," Mr Morse said.

"The sense of local community must be preserved in the face of growth, and thereby mitigate the disadvantages of growth."

The proposed statutory authorities or development corporations would be the spearhead of development, "but it is essential that the local authorities should be full and active partners..."

The councils would keep their electors fully informed, and seek their active support and acceptance, thus reducing fear born of misunderstanding.

Eventually the development corporations could be wound up, and the councils could combine to establish "a second tier of local government on a metropolitan pattern, to take over the responsibilities of the authority as well as any other works or services then thought to be necessary."

The Morse code for local government participation in growth-centre planning struck a responsive chord among most of those present at the Orange conference.

One of its advantages is that it would retain an institutional buffer between anxious landholders and planners for whom a property is merely an area marked on the map.

Land acquisition, probably the most sensitive area of growth-centre planning, will be examined in a third and final article.

A previous article in this series appeared on Monday.