Don't Cry for me Upper Wombat: The Realities of Regional/Small Town Decline in Non Coastal Australia

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Introduction

This paper seeks to stimulate the kind of frank and well informed discussion that is required if government is to work effectively with rural communities in responding to the fundamental changes impacting on Australia's declining regions. Part of this process involves the dissemination of recent research findings, which provide an accurate and coherent view of the extent, nature and consequences of decline being experienced by certain Australian country towns and rural communities. It is vitally important that those with a personal or professional interest in the future of these towns understand the often quite complex factors that have resulted in a proliferation of towns such as the mythical Upper Wombat – once prosperous rural supply towns experiencing ongoing decline.

With certain qualifications our views regarding the fundamental causes of regional/small town decline are broadly similar to those mentioned in Gordon Forth's much discussed *Yellowbrick Road* paper which argued that the decline and eventual demise of many of Australia's smaller country towns is an inevitable part of the modernisation and urbanisation of Australian society. Just as Australian governments have seen the need to assist non-viable farmers to leave the industry with some

dignity and assets, we would argue that similar assistance should be made available to the remaining residents of Upper Wombats rather than maintaining the fiction that all such towns can somehow be revived. We recognise the limited capacity of government to somehow revitalise Australia's declining towns unable to reinvent themselves is of real concern. Left to market forces the future residents of Upper Wombat will not only become fewer in number, older and poorer, but increasingly disadvantaged in terms of access to services. Above all, in developing strategies that provide practical assistance to the residents of Upper Wombat the realities of Australia's declining country towns first needs to be understood and addressed.

Recent research[1] confirms the first hand experience of the residents of rural, and regional Australia that much of non-coastal regional Australia, the other side of the Sandstone Curtain, is experiencing significant decline. Australian Bureau of Statistics data provide clear evidence of the nature, extent and location of decline in non-metropolitan regional Australia. With decline has come the emergence of depressed regional communities evidenced by high levels of welfare dependence, lower than national and state average income levels, the loss of essential services as well as more visible indicators of decline such as unsaleable houses, closed businesses and the generally decaying state of local infrastructure (Baum *et al.* 1999; Bell 1995; Bray 2000; Hugo 2001; Lloyd, Harding and Hellwig 2000; National Economics 2000; National

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[1] For an excellent summary of recent, relevant research see Bill Pritchard, Phil McManus 2000, *Land of Discontent. The Dynamics of Change in Rural and Regional Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney.

Economics and Australian Local Government Association 2002). Within Australia's traditional wool-wheat areas regional decline is most evident in the smaller centres with a population of less than 4,000, while overall, larger regional centres (over 10,000) tend to be stable or growing (Baum *et al.* 1999). What is significant is that many declining smaller country towns are located in agricultural regions, which have experienced relative prosperity over the past decade. It also needs to be emphasised that many Australian country towns with populations of 4,000 or less are not experiencing significant decline (Baum *et al.* 1999; Department of Infrastructure 2001; Kenyon *et al.* 2001; Stimson *et al.* 2001). Those that have stabilised or growing are, in the main located on the eastern seaboard or on the fringe of the major metropolitan or regional population centres. Those that are declining tend to be concentrated in the inland rural areas and are towns, which still rely heavily on local agriculture to generate wealth and employment (Baum *et al.* 1999; Bell 1995; Bray 2000; Department of Infrastructure 2000, 2001; Hugo 2001; Lloyd *et al.* 2000; Stimson *et al.* 2001).

The title of Gordon Forth's June 2000 paper, *Following the Yellowbrick Road,* suggests that Australia should learn and where possible avoid the worst consequences of small town decline so evident in much of the United States. While acknowledging that there are significant differences between non-coastal rural Australia and the American Midwest, the paper argued much can be learnt from the recent experiences of the United States, where regional decline is generally more advanced and starkly apparent than in Australia (Drebenstott and Smith 1996; Galston and Baeher 1995; Lyons 2001). Forth's paper also cautioned against placing our trust in *false wizards*, such as the well meaning but totally fraudulent Wizard of Oz, amongst those who have intentionally or unintentionally misled residents of Australia's small towns regarding the realities of decline. The *false wizards* Forth referred to include politicians and small town revivalists – professional optimists with their simplistic quick-fix solutions to the complex problems of small town decline.

In reality, regional decline in non-coastal Australia is part of an inevitable historical process and should be accepted as such. Over the past two centuries, once largely agrarian societies, including Australia, have become ever more urbanised and industrialised. The reasons for the ongoing movement of population from rural areas of Australia to regional and metropolitan centres have been well documented (Bell 1995, 1996; Bray 2000; Department of Infrastructure 2000, 2001; Forth 2000). These include the mechanisation of resource industries (farming, mining and forestry) and the concentration of major manufacturing and service industries in larger urban centres. Within Australia's rural regions a transport revolution involving the development of cheap, reliable motor transport and better roads has facilitated the decline of many small towns as residents and local farmers use their increased mobility to shop and access services elsewhere. In terms of aggregate expenditure most farm income is now spent in towns with populations greater than 20, 000 (Levantis 2001). The ongoing reality is that people have and will increasingly gravitate to where cheaper, more varied goods and services that are more sophisticated can be accessed. In the case of regional Australia, these include financial and legal services, healthcare and related aged care, entertainment and recreation, and education and training (Bray 2000). In non-coastal regional Australia the growth of the new, post-industrial service economy and the employment that it generates has mainly been confined to larger regional centres such as Tamworth, Bendigo and Whyalla.

As well as the development of capital rather than labour intensive agriculture, the population of much of rural Australia has, and will continue to decline, as a result of farm consolidation (Kelty 1994a, 1994b; Kenyon *et al.* 2001). It needs to be understood that the consolidation of Australian farm units, many of which were established as part of ideologically driven closer settlement schemes, has been taking place since the 1870s. Though less evident during periods of relative agricultural prosperity, the process of farm consolidation with a reduction in the number of farms and people engaged in agriculture has been and will be ongoing. This has obvious consequences for small rural service towns developed to serve the local farm population and where expenditure by farmers can account for a third of the economy of rural supply towns (Levantis 2001). The anticipated growth of industrialised agriculture will accelerate this trend though its effects may be partly offset by

significant change in land use from grazing to growing, or broad acre farming to more labour intensive horticulture. This is not the case with tree forestry such as Blue Gum plantations, which has led to the loss of a number of farming families from rural communities and accelerated the demise of some struggling rural towns.

Above all the service function of many rural supply towns has been eroded by the increased capacity and desire of local residents to access goods and services in larger centres. It needs to be understood that the location of many of Australia's older rural towns was determined by the limitations of horse drawn transport. For example, in South West Victoria many villages were established at twenty-mile intervals as coaching stops where the horses could be changed and passengers obtain refreshments at the local inn. These towns subsequently provided essential goods and services for local farming families. However, following the advent of cheap motorised transport, farmers and town residents have increasingly travelled to larger centres for employment and to access goods and services. In many cases, the closure and long term viability of businesses in declining country towns has resulted from an increased leakage of wealth as residents shop and access services elsewhere.

On the other hand efficient motorised transport has allowed some otherwise declining small towns within commuting distance of larger centres to basically reinvent themselves as lifestyle housing estates. For example housing in the scenically located township of Koroit some sixteen kilometres north west of Warrnambool, is now much sought after by families who work and shop for all but the most basic goods in Warrnambool. There are many similar instances in the American Midwest where most shops in the main street are now closed yet the housing and other local infrastructure are fully utilised by a highly mobile commuter population.

Clearly the loss of population through migration and declining birth rates, the closure of local businesses, churches, schools and hospitals together with Australians' desire to access more sophisticated services are the key generators of a spiral of decline in which many small towns now find themselves (Budge 1996; Collits 2000). The closure of the town's sole bank or pharmacy

obviously reduces the viability of the remaining businesses as the residents go elsewhere to purchase goods and services. Together with the loss of farm and farm related employment it is this increased demand and ability of residents and farmers to access cheaper goods and more sophisticated services elsewhere that are critical factors in explaining the accelerated decline of many smaller Australian country towns over the past two decades. Take for example the changes in community expectations regarding the standard of medical service we expect for our families. Twenty years ago most residents of small towns were generally satisfied to have their children delivered by their general practitioner at their local community hospital. Nowadays, increased public awareness, the high cost of medical insurance together with the dominance of medical specialists at hospitals means that most deliveries and all but the most basic surgery are carried out at major hospitals in larger centres. Similarly long gone are the days when the sole mechanic at the local garage had the necessary expertise and equipment to service modern, computerised motor vehicles.

The Flight and Non-Return of Youth

Perhaps the greatest area of concern for Australia's declining towns/regional communities is the flight and non-return of young adults who have left their Upper Wombats to access employment and educational opportunities in larger centres (Department of Infrastructure 2000). Although declining birth rates are an Australia wide trend this decline, when linked with the out-migration of youth and the failure to attract overseas migrants to regional areas, has resulted in many regional towns and communities ageing faster than urban Australia. The rapid ageing of the remaining population in rural towns and communities leads to the loss of youthful vitality, and hope, as the town finds itself unable to field sporting teams or hold social functions for young people. Some youth return as young adults but they are more likely to return as retirees which compounds the problem of an ageing population (Bell 1996; Hugo 2001). In his analysis of population movement in regional Australia, Graeme Hugo observes that there is a significant movement of post thirty year olds back

to regional centres, but not small towns (Hugo 2001). A recent Victorian Department of Infrastructure report concludes that, 'Slower regional growth in the 1990s was not caused by more young people leaving the regions but by fewer moving to them ...' (Department of Infrastructure 2001). Clearly, in terms of Australia's non-coastal regions, there is an ongoing net loss of young adults particularly from the smaller towns and farming communities.

The flight and non-return youth from Australia's inland regions may have as much to do with cultural factors as the need to find employment and access higher education opportunities. In their article on the decline of rural Minnesota, Joseph and Anthony Amato make several thoughtful observations regarding the flight and non-return of youth from North American farming communities. Though the Amatos' article relates specifically to Minnesota's disappearing ethnic farming communities, their conclusions are broadly applicable to the changed and changing circumstances of contemporary rural Australia.

For the Amatos, '... *the children and grandchildren of these farmers no longer partake in the old ways.* [Time and circumstances] ... *have elevated them to being fully-fledged consumers, individuals who value regional choice ... over the old trinity of farm, family, and faith.* [For America's and Australia's rural youth, the] ... *promise of education and career now open a thousand roads for those who have desires and ambitions.* [For many young people] ... *the price of sacrificing to stay on the farm has become too high. Families, that just a generation before did everything in their power to keep children on the land, are now, for the first time, encouraging children to leave it'* (Amato and Amato 2000).

In the rural Australian context stories abound of how Wal and Jean were forced to sell the farm or their business in a country town because none of their children was interested and, having retired, the couple subsequently moved to Melbourne to access amenities and be near the grandchildren.

In Australia's small towns and farming communities, the desire to leave (and not return) is most strongly felt by young women, especially those who have completed secondary school (Young 1987). Without the lure of inheriting the

farm and having vicariously experienced the 'good life' via television programs such as *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City*, for many young women the opportunity to move to the city and pursue a career as a secretary, nurse or teacher is infinitely more enticing than the prospect of becoming a farmer's wife. Young's 1987 study revealed that while 50 per cent of sons returned within a decade of leaving their rural communities, only 40 per cent of daughters returned. Hence, future Saturday nights in Upper Wombat's sole pub may witness growing numbers of no longer young, but still single males seeking solace in beer, boasting and possibly the services of visiting sex workers.

Similarly, logic suggests that it is women who will over time be the drivers for many farming and small town residents to relocate to larger regional centres. The changing nature of Australian agriculture together with the ongoing decline of regional communities is resulting in numbers of active as well as retired farmers relocating to regional centres. Faced with the demise of their local community, the loss of services that can be obtained locally and the need for family members to travel considerable distances to larger centres, an attractive option for these families is to purchase a house in town. Apart from enabling family members, especially women, to generate critical off-farm income through paid employment, such a move provides these women with a stimulating social and cultural life. Offset against the requirements for farmers to commute to work there are other obvious benefits for younger family members. These include the elimination of wasted hours on school buses and the opportunity for children and teenagers to participate in social and sporting activities in town without parents being obliged to provide transport.

What we are suggesting is that the causes of regional decline, including small town decline, are fundamentally a result of long-term historical processes and recent cultural change, rather than the impact of government policy. While Federal and State government policy responses to globalisation – including privatisation, rationalisation, centralisation of services, have certainly accelerated the process of small town decline, politicians have basically not caused it. Were these policies to be reversed, it would make little difference in the longer term to Australia's declining

regions and small towns. Nor can these communities look to another political aberration such as the rise of One Nation, or the Federal Government's somewhat belated interest in regional Australia, in anticipation of massive public funding to resuscitate declining small towns. Clearly, the cavalry is not coming and there will be no significant injection of government funding to rescue declining country towns. The Australian electorate has consistently indicated their preference for low taxing governments. In any case, available funding for regional Australia is more likely to be directed toward resolving major environmental degradation problems such as the Murray-Darling river basin or increased spending on defence or counter terrorism.

Given the realities of regional decline, what can be said regarding the likely future population distribution in regional rural Australia? For reasons outlined in this paper, the population of regional Australia, if we exclude the eastern seaboard, will increasingly be concentrated in the larger regional centres and smaller satellite commuter towns. Within the traditional wool-wheat belt some towns will disappear, while in others the population will not only decline but will also become older, poorer, and increasingly disadvantaged in terms of employment opportunities and access to services. Some smaller inland rural centres will stabilise or even grow due to their distance from larger centres or simply because of the demise of neighbouring towns. Other small towns may survive for a time by becoming convenient locations for Australia's growing underclass attracted by cheap housing. Though hard evidence is lacking, there are indications that the movement of so-called 'ferals'[2] or disadvantaged families into declining small towns is already happening (Budge 1996). As the authors of the recent *State of the Regions* report point out, using population growth to drive regional economies, without consideration of the age and household characteristics of the existing and new residents may create additional strain on existing services (National Economics and Australian Local Government Association 2002). It does not require a great deal of imagination to envisage why well meaning social workers in Melbourne and Sydney

might encourage 'problem families' to take advantage of cheaper rents and possibly experience rural redemption by relocating to an Upper Wombat. How such families will cope with the realities of life in such towns where basic services and opportunities for employment are few or non-existent, and their impact on the local population, are issues of real and pressing concern.

The Limits of Small Town Revivalism

Given that a significant number of Australia's smaller country towns will continue to experience some form of decline and that the cavalry is not coming, what can or should be done by government to assist residents of such towns? One option is to do nothing and simply let the fate of each Upper Wombat be determined by market forces. Another possibility for government is to provide each town with funding to employ an inspirational consultant to assist these communities to somehow reinvent themselves. This is essentially what small town revivalism, with its origins in depressed rural areas of the United States, is about. At its most effective, small town revivalism can assist committed small town communities with inspiration and hope to address and occasionally reverse the seemingly inexorable spiral of decline. In other cases they may provide small towns with a period of remission, postponing the towns' inevitable decline and eventual demise.

Yet, while small town revivalism has obvious appeal to certain politicians (possibly for the wrong reasons) and residents of Australia's declining country towns, this approach at best provides only a limited 'solution' to 'dying town syndrome'. Like much of the promotional material generated by regional tourism authorities the exponents of small town revivalism — including the high profile Peter Kenyon are inclined to conveniently ignore the realities of regional/small town decline while critics tend to be dismissed as 'doomsayers' or, in extreme cases, 'academic stirrers'.

Basically, the 'small town revivalists' would have us believe that every Upper Wombat can be saved if the remaining residents, inspired by a 'Small Town Doctor', are sufficiently committed and innovative. The realities of farm consolidation, the

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[2] This unfortunate term is widely used by existing residents in describing the recent movement of problem families into Australia's declining smaller towns.

mechanisation of agriculture and local manufacturing and the flight and non-return of youth tend to be conveniently ignored. Disregarding the lack of even essential services and employment opportunities, we are assured any town can reinvent itself as some kind of bush tourism centre. As an 'inspirational' example of how a 'town' can 'survive' without services, Kenyon, in an interview with Ian Kenins, amazingly cites the case of Wittenoom, the former asbestos mining town in north west Western Australia, with no services or power but '... 20 families still call it home' (Kenins 2001).

In Kenyon's case, the main evidence offered in support of his claim that every Upper Wombat can not only survive, but revive, are several fairly well worn examples of successful revivalism including the Beechworth Bakery and Harrow's Sound and Light Show where local volunteers 'dress up as cops, bushrangers, whores and priests in a play set in wild colonial times'(Kenyon *et al.* 2001). Longer-term issues such as whether or not the required voluntary commitment of residents to preserve their town will be taken up by their children (if any of them remain in Upper Wombat) are simply ignored. Similarly, with residents exhorted to be positive at all costs, any minor achievements, such as the reopening of a declining town's coffee shop, are heralded as major triumphs for Small Town Revivalism. A similar, but more grounded approach to revitalising country towns experiencing 'listless and diminished resolve' was taken in '*Tim Fischer's Outback Heroes: And Communities that Count*'. According to the authors, with '...dynamic local leadership...' there '....are communities without obvious attractions or resources enjoying revival and renewal' (Rees and Fischer 2002). Yet, while such admirable efforts may postpone the demise of such towns, it is difficult to see how most of these towns can survive in the longer term given the realities of regional decline.

At the same time certain non-coastal Australian Upper Wombats *will* survive as rural supply towns, protected by distance and bad roads from terminal leakage of trade and hence people, to the nearest regional centre. Other Upper Wombats will survive at the expense of the neighbouring Bilby Creek who, like the once prosperous town of Thylacine, will eventually die and disappear. Small town revivalism has a role to play in the process of sorting out which towns remain as viable centres leaving others to die or survive by providing low cost housing for Australia's growing generational underclass.

One of the most worrying aspects of the seductive appeal of small town revivalism is that it provides Australian government at all levels with an excuse not to address the ongoing realities of regional/small town decline. Having been provided with the services of a consultant, residents of Upper Wombat can then be deemed responsible for their own fate. It could be argued that communities who fail to meet the challenge of successfully reinventing their towns have no one to blame but themselves. This would be unfortunate, unjust, and dishonest!

What is to be Done?

We should like to conclude this paper by offering constructive suggestions regarding how we as a society might best assist the residents of regional communities experiencing ongoing decline. First, governments need to be far more selective in allocating scarce resources to assist Australia's declining small towns rather than take a politically motivated 'scattergun' approach (Collits 1999). We could do worse than follow the example of the American federal government of classifying such towns as:

(a) Having basically stabilised and therefore not requiring government assistance;

(b) Those who remain marginal and could go either way;

(c) Those that are beyond help.

It seems logical, though obviously politically difficult, to identify and concentrate our resources in assisting category (b) towns.

Given that it is people not places that matter, we need to be wary of well-intentioned calls to preserve certain declining towns as living museums. Advertising agencies as well as the makers of Australian television programs and films ensure that we are well aware of the significance of Australian rural towns in the formation of Australia's distinctive national identity. However, the realities of life in Australia's Upper Wombats are very different from the idealised version that has

been presented in long running television dramas such as *Bellbird, Country Practice*, and *Blue Heelers*. As a caring community, we need to face up to the reality of just what life is like and will be like for the residents of Australia's declining small towns.

We also need to take account of the fact that due to improved transport people live in regional communities rather than small towns. As such, while small towns were once relatively autonomous centres this is no longer the case. Residents are increasingly using their greater mobility to work, shop and access services in other centres. Residents of rural Australia should be encouraged to regard themselves as members of integrated regional communities. The view of larger regional cities as parasitic 'sponge' centres which are somehow sucking the life out of smaller towns within the region is neither accurate nor helpful. To address problems of regional decline, including 'dying town syndrome', the leaders of Australia's regional communities need to rise above such parochial rivalries. In time, this will involve further restructuring and much improved funding arrangements for local government as part of their evolution as larger regional governments.

In terms of future government policy, the critical question is what can be done by way of governments providing practical assistance to residents of small towns facing ongoing decline. As well as providing financial assistance to marginal but potentially viable centres, serious consideration needs to be given to assisting people who wish to leave category (c) towns but can't, to relocate in larger centres with better opportunities for employment and access to essential services. In some cases governments might provide financial assistance to enable families to relocate their unsaleable houses or business premises in their nearest large regional centre. After all, is this approach so different from the federal government's recent policy initiatives to encourage non-viable dairy or sugar farmers to leave the industry?

Above all the residents of small towns/regional communities experiencing decline need to be provided with detailed and accurate information regarding what has and is likely to happen to *their* community. For example in coming to an understanding of whether or not their town has a

reasonable future, the residents of Upper Wombat need to know just who has left and why, or just how can essential services be provided in the short and longer term. Only when the causes, extent and nature of changes impacting on such regional communities are properly understood can residents work with local organisations and government to develop *realistic* and hence achievable strategies. There is of course always the risk that such a frank and factual assessment of a town or region experiencing decline, will become a self-fulfilling prophecy acting as a disincentive for private or public investment, or influence more residents to leave. Yet surely this is preferable to accepting exaggerated claims contained in local promotional material as real, or the revivalists' confident assertions that given inspired leadership and the right vision any town can make it. Ultimately such patronising dishonestly will only generate cynicism and despair when the residents of Upper Wombat experience the illusory nature of such visions and promises. There is now an opportunity for political and community leaders at all levels, regional development professionals and even consultants to take a more honest, hence constructive approach to addressing the realities of small town and regional decline. As a caring community, we certainly do not need to *Follow the Yellowbrick Road* and leave the residents of such communities to fend for themselves. However, to effectively address problems of regional decline will require more honest and better-informed leadership at all levels than has been the case to date.

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