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Author

Dodson, Jago

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Federal policy for Australia's cities: The 2011 National Urban Policy in historical and comparative perspective¹

Jago Dodson, Urban Research Program, Griffith University.

Abstract

Spatial planning and urban infrastructure have emerged as important foci of debates about cities in the last decade. The Australian government has returned to the urban terrain via an infrastructure program and urban policy development after more than a decade of dormancy on urban issues. This paper examines the new urban policy in an historical context to assess how it represents an evolution in federal approaches to cities. First the paper reviews recent scholarly debates about national level urban policy. Next the paper reviews the Australian experience of national level urban policy, focusing on the policy approach adopted. Lastly the paper assesses how the current national urban policy represents an evolution of previous efforts. The paper argues that although the new urban policy arrangements avoid some of the weaknesses of previous attempts they are nonetheless fragile in new ways.

Introduction

A broad literature has emerged in the past two decades that reports considerable changes to the extent and purpose of metropolitan level urban planning. Accelerating processes of spatial restructuring in urban regions under increasingly globalised and competitive economic conditions have been accompanied by fragmentation of institutional and governance processes in cities and by an expanding presence and influence of private actors in urban decision-making processes. The restructuring of cities has seen parallel transformations of the conception of urban planning which has evolved away from conventional structured land-use blueprinting towards spatial planning and more recently, spatial strategy making (Faludi 2004) characterised by a 'relational' (Healey 2006) planning imaginary. This relational planning itself partly reflects the complexity of contemporary change in city-regions which are characterised by processes such as globalisation, spatial re-scaling, and deterritorialisation. The adoption or pursuit of such new strategic spatial planning processes is not universal however with the past few years also witnessing the emergence of project-based urban management styles formed around major infrastructure (Dodson 2009; Neuman and Smith 2010).

Much recent discussion of contemporary spatial strategy making and its variants or hybrids has been framed around the focal territorial scale of the city-region (Faludi 2004; Healey 2006; Bunker and Searle 2009). The planning literature has dedicated far less recent attention to urban planning or urban policy at the national level. Indeed, a dominant theme within urban economic, geographical and planning thinking over the past two decades has been that the nation-state has withered as a shaper and manager of globalised economic processes as the city-region has ascended to a new position as the primary territorial entity and nodal unit within the neoliberal networked global economy. Yet new countervailing pressures manifest in contemporary global-scale economic and environmental policy problems are demanding the re-engagement of the nation state. In order to act globally national states will likely need to act through their major city-regions.

In contrast with the relatively limited recent scholarly interest in national level urban policy making the past few years have witnessed increasing evidence of a new, albeit uneven, national-state attentiveness to urban questions, in such jurisdictions as the United States (Turner 2010), United Kingdom (Marvin, Harding et al. 2006) and Australia (Infrastructure Australia 2008; COAG 2008). The UK for example has pondered the potential for a national 'city-regions' policy (Marvin, Harding et al. 2006) to harness the potential of its large metropolitan areas, though this has largely been manifest in facilitating new metropolitan governance arrangements (eg Manchester). While the precise character of any widespread

¹ The comments and insights of two anonymous reviewers assisted to improve the paper.

renewed national-state urban policy presence is still evolving and could yet falter sufficient detail has emerged in Australia of a resurgence of national scale urban policy making since 2007 that is forming around two key strands. First is a national level urban ‘infrastructure turn’ which reflects the shift towards infrastructure-based urban management already initiated in Australian metro-regions (see Dodson 2009). Second, there is a newer national-state recognition and interest in Australia’s major city-regions as critical national nodes which exert critical influence on the national economy and which must be managed collectively at the national scale to improve aggregate performance (Infrastructure Australia 2010). Although national level urban policy is not novel in the Australian context the post-2007 developments comprise a distinctive evolution of ambition and mode of intervention.

This paper examines the recent emergence of Australia’s post-2007 national urban policy program as a case study that can aid understanding of national-level urban policy. The purpose of the paper is twofold. First, to appraise the current mode of Australian national urban policy intervention against previous attempts, to assess how the Federal state has evolved its periodic involvement in urban affairs. Second, the paper seeks to assess, as best possible, the effectiveness of the post-2007 urban policy in terms of improving conditions in Australia’s major cities. The paper offers some assessment of these various efforts and considers the prospects for the current national urban policy program to effect meaningful change within Australia’s major cities. The approach taken in the paper is of historical review based on secondary sources, focusing on the prevailing concerns that Federal involvement addressed and the programmatic mode by this this occurred, emphasising multi-level governance and fiscal arrangements. In assessing the later national urban policy program the paper limits attention to two key elements. First, the shift to infrastructure based federal interventions in urban processes and second, an attempt at national level harmonisation of state metropolitan planning motivated by a raft of national level imperatives.

The Australian Experience of National Urban Policy

Australia is an overwhelmingly urban nation. Approximately 50 per cent of the nation’s population resides in the middle and outer suburbs of the major cities (O’Connor and Healy 2004). Despite this overwhelming urban character Australian national policy has largely ignored or avoided urban questions since Federation in 1901. Only three periods of serious Federal interest in cities are discernable during the course during the 20th Century: the Commonwealth postwar housing and planning programs of the 1940s-1960s, the Department of Urban and Regional Development program during 1972-1975 and the (Building) Better Cities program of 1991-1996. In the 21st Century a newly invigorated Federal urban interest emerged, signified most prominently by an infrastructure investment program and a formal National Urban Policy which seeks to harmonise State auspiced spatial planning harmonisation at the metropolitan scale, among the major cities.

The potential for national-level urban policy in Australia is shaped by wider constitutional and governmental architecture. Australia’s Federal government possesses strong taxation and revenue raising powers plus critical responsibilities of immigration control, which regulates population flows and thus urban growth rates, as well as interest rate settings which influence aggregate business and dwelling investment, particularly in commercial development and housing. Yet the activities on which the Federal government may intervene are limited constitutionally towards those of a national scope. Territorial matters, including housing, land and urban development, are typically State responsibilities for which there is no direct Federal role. Conversely the States have responsibility for the territorial delivery of an array of services and infrastructure, including strategic urban planning development regulation and most physical urban infrastructure, such as water, electricity, sewers, roads and rail. Yet the States have weak revenue powers from which they can fund such services and infrastructure. With the basic animators of urban development – population and capital flows – held by the Commonwealth, the States face major spatial planning and infrastructure coordination problems. Thus urban planning is positioned within a classic Australian constitutional policy tension between a well resourced Commonwealth with constrained leverage on direct service provision accompanied by capable States who have limited funds with which to resource their urban planning schemes and deliver infrastructure. It is from this conundrum which contemporary urban policy has emerged, as it has on multiple previous occasions.

The remainder of this paper seeks to understand the conditions that led to the emergence of the contemporary National Urban Policy as the fourth major instance of Australian federal intervention in

cities. The approach adopted is of minor case studies for three preceding urban policy phases followed by a major case study for the most recent phase. The purpose of the appraisal for each case study is threefold. First the assessment attempts to describe the economic, social and policy challenges apparent at the national level during the period in question. Next the appraisal links the superordinate policy challenges to the policy programs undertaken at each period. Lastly the assessment attempts to typify the mode of intervention undertaken by the Commonwealth in terms of the strategic aims and approach taken, any agencies established to support this aim, the instruments used to achieve this purpose and the role of funding and financing. The analysis is based on two main sources: in the earlier cases secondary sources are used to identify the key Commonwealth policy concerns and actions; in the latter cases where the readier availability of documentation applies the primary materials are used as sources. To assist the discussion a table of key program features was constructed (Table 1).

Urban Policy I - Post-War Reconstruction

In the late phases of World War II the challenges of advancing an urbanised nation became key policy considerations. After nearly two decades of either economic depression or war, which had suppressed housing construction and urban development, shortages of dwellings and materials were pressing economic and welfare concerns. In the immediate post-WWII period an extensive program of 'reconstruction' was undertaken in response to a range of national economic and social deficits that had built up since the Great Depression, including in housing supply -- volume and quality -- and urban development – coordination and integration. In 1942 a Commonwealth Housing Commission had been established to advise on the apposite mix of policy and programs needed to improve Australia's urban housing and planning, which reported in 1944 (Commonwealth Housing Commission 1944). This effort established the basis for national-level intervention in housing and urban affairs leading to a major public rental housing program accompanied by a form of delineation of national interest in metropolitan planning involving the establishment of State capital city metropolitan planning authorities which would then undertake spatial plans each of these cities .

The primary urban policy pursued by the Commonwealth during this period was the establishment of a Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) with the States which provided for a national rental housing program. The 1945 CSHA provided for federal loan funding to the States for the purposes of improving the supply of affordable housing for low income families (Troy 2012). This was largely delivered by the States through housing authorities that constructed and managed public rental housing.

In addition to the CHSA the main further Commonwealth urban initiative during the 1940s-1960s was to give impetus to the establishment of systematic spatial planning systems to be applied through metropolitan spatial plans for Australia's major cities. These were rolled out during the 1950s and 1960s beginning with the County of Cumberland Council's Planning Scheme (1948). Yet the Commonwealth did not control the development and implementation of these plans. These schemes, particularly the Sydney and Melbourne plans, were typically unable to accommodate without deficit the high levels of urban growth experienced over these decades, especially rapid suburbanisation. Many outer suburban municipalities were unable to cope with the servicing task of accommodating large numbers of new residents who took up both state sponsored rental and home-ownership opportunities but also availed the greater availability of housing finance and materials, plus rising wages during the long boom of the 1950s and 1960s, to achieve owner occupation.

How might the mode of intervention adopted by the Commonwealth from the 1940s to the 1960s be typified? Given the novelty of the Commonwealth's first major foray into urban affairs it is not surprising that the policy involved a combination of strategic policy objectives, negotiated arrangements with the States as a group and bilaterally, and an array of ad-hoc agreements on various matters. Based on a reading of the relevant archives, Troy (2012, p. 129) has described the Commonwealth's domineering approach as a "one-sided interpretation of the notion of cooperative Federalism". But effectively the Commonwealth operated as a national level policy agent which had to also construct the inter-governmental architecture through which it could operate, within the context of the Australian Constitution. This largely involved the multi-lateral CSHA which combined funding arrangements with agreed actions on the part of the States. This instrument was better at achieving housing outcomes than planning results; housing can be measured as an output, in terms of physical dwellings produced and the Commonwealth

provided funds directly for this purpose, whereas urban planning influences the outputs of other actors, rather than itself producing, urban development. As a result the lasting contribution of the program was the provision of public housing at scale in Australia.

Table 1: Major phases of Commonwealth urban policy and their modes of action.

Program, Prime Minister and Urban Minister	Period	Key national policy issues	Key actions	Mode of Federal Involvement
Phase I Post-War Reconstruction (PWRC)	1945-1966	Housing shortages and affordability Urban growth and development Technical and material supplies Institutional coordination Financing availability	Rental housing construction program Promotion of metropolitan planning authorities and schemes	<i>Keynesian Welfarism</i> Ministry of National Development Commonwealth State Housing Agreement with conditions Inter-departmental committee (building supply) Negotiated arrangements with states on ad-hoc basis.
Phase II Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) G. Whitlam T. Uren	1972-1975	Spatial development imbalances Urban service deficits Land market stabilisation and value capture	Land commissions program Expansion of public housing Sewerage backlog program Growth centres policy	<i>Social Justice and Efficiency</i> Dedicated Commonwealth agency (DURD) Cities Commission National Capital Development Authority Inter-departmental coordination Cooperative multi- and bi-lateral Commonwealth-State agreements
Phase III (Building) Better Cities P. Keating B. Howe	1991-1996	Deindustrialisation and urban restructuring Economic competitiveness Counter cyclical economic stimulus Public sector management reform	Place based redevelopment projects Infrastructure Urban renewal Also <i>National Housing Strategy</i>	<i>Efficiency, Restructuring and Social justice</i> Program fund Spatially targeted infrastructure and redevelopment projects Plus wider social support reforms.
Phase IV National Urban Policy K. Rudd A. Albanese	2007-2013	Economic competitiveness Vertical and horizontal policy harmonisation and cohesion Framing a national perspective on cities	Infrastructure program COAG Reform Agenda Major Cities Unit	<i>Efficiency/Productivity and Liveability</i> Infrastructure (co-)investment COAG processes Internal cross-portfolio integration

Urban and Regional Development

By the 1970s the problems of post-war urban development had become sufficiently widespread and prominent that they gained a national significance. This new ‘Australian ugliness’ (Boyd 1960) of ‘shapeless incremental sprawl’ (G. Whitlam, cited in Orchard 1999) gave rise to a search for new ideas for Australian cities (Stretton 1975) in which spatial development questions were prominent (Neutze 1965). Although the McMahon government established an advisory National Urban and Regional Development Authority this had limited effect before a change of government (Lloyd and Troy 1978). In 1972 a Labor Federal government was elected whose central platform was an urban agenda organised around the premise that “the national government must increasingly share with State and local government responsibility for rebuilding our existing cities, and building new ones” (Whitlam 1973). During this period, the Commonwealth undertook an expansive program of urban intervention via a new Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) (Lloyd and Troy 1981).

The DURD program included a raft of land-use interventions including the establishment of suburban land commissions to stabilise land markets, accompanied by growth centres policies – inspired by Neutze’s (1965) thinking – to overcome uneven metropolitan spatial structures by redistributing a greater proportion of urban activities towards suburban centres and away from congested city cores. This avowedly spatial strategy sought to redirect growth in commercial land-uses to under-resourced new suburban zones which were often distant from employment and services. The DURD also undertook infrastructure provision in Australian cities primarily supplying sewerage to yet unserved suburban subdivisions. In addition DURD oversaw the National Capital Development Commission. The largest DURD programs by expenditure included the Land Commissions and growth centres, Canberra planning and development, and urban sewerage (Bunker 1978).

The Whitlam era marked a transition point in Commonwealth approach to urban intervention both in terms of the imperatives addressed and the means by which they were pursued. Whereas the early post-War period had seen a focus on welfare redress primarily of post-Depression housing deficits, the Whitlam era represented a dual concern with finessing some of the errors or overlooked components of the earlier programs while looking forwards to wider and emerging considerations around the economic and environmental efficiency of Australia’s cities. While the earlier programs had emphasised the organisation and delivery of housing production via the Commonwealth-State arrangements, the Whitlam period saw a more analytical approach which reached less to direct intervention and rather to facilitation of arrangements and conditions which would lead to the desired ends, described by Bunker (1978) as ‘cooperative planning’. That said the establishment of a dedicated Commonwealth agency in the form of the Department of Urban and Regional Development was an experiment that proved both bold, in that it sought to sidestep existing agency inertia, but overly radical, as the agility it enjoyed enabled it to build quick momentum which found reaction from other agencies and many of the States .

(Building) Better Cities

The DURD program was abolished in 1976 by an incoming Liberal-National party coalition government. Both the Liberal-National coalition government of 1975-1983 and the Labor government of 1983-1990 were disinterested in urban issues. Orchard (1999) describes the 1975-1983 Federal government as taking a ‘libertarian’ approach to cities framed around urban management, initial development of urban consolidation as a strategic stance and performance-based regulation.

Under the 1983-1990 Labor government urban policy questions beyond public housing were avoided or resisted for two main reasons. First, interventionist urban policy was perceived as tainted by Labor’s experience of the 1972-1975 period, notwithstanding Whitlam’s various achievements. The ‘ghosts of DURD’ haunted the corridors of power long after the agency’s demise (Alexander 1994). Second, the mid- to late-1980s was dominated by major restructuring of the national financial and industrial arrangements accompanied by the application of new management principles within the public sector (Badcock 1993; Alexander 1994; Orchard 1999). This limited Commonwealth involvement largely allowed the States to restructure their spatial planning arrangements as they determined, often in line with the nationally expressed principles of public sector management and competition policy.

A significant revival of a national urban program occurred however during the 1990s, initially via the first phase Better Cities program (BCP) of 1991-1992 and the second phase Building Better Cities (BBCP) during 1992-1996². Badcock (1993) has argued that the Better Cities policy arose initially as a deliberate program of spatial redistribution organised around area renewal and improvements, focusing on housing affordability, locational disadvantage, urban transport (and energy) diseconomies, urban environmental degradation and infrastructure financial burdens, with a distinct social justice flavour. Particular political momentum for this approach came from then Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe who had a longstanding interest in urban social justice issues especially around housing. Others have argued that the BCP was a response to the urban consequences of the deregulation of the national economy during the 1980s which had seen strong flows of foreign capital into the central districts of Australia's major cities, during a period when accelerating restructuring of the suburban manufacturing economy (Berry and Huxley 1992) yet combined with market failures in some inner urban property markets (Nielsen 2008).

Although it had been initiated with a social justice intent, political imperatives created by the 1991 recession saw the Better Cities Program quickly recruited into a wider Federal 'crisis management' strategy organised around nation building objectives (One Nation) and as a job-creation stimulus tied to growing concerns about urban economic efficiency and capital underinvestment (Badcock 1993). The original spatial, often outer suburban, redistributive and ameliorative intent of the initial BCP phase thus gave way to the capital stimulus of the BBC targeted to infrastructure and redevelopment, often with an inner urban emphasis. The introduction of more explicit economic efficiency imperatives during the BBCP phase meant that much of the redressive needs-based support for distressed urban communities, especially those on the city fringes, was redirected to rail, road and port projects. State and corporate capital formation thus usurped social investment (O'Connor 1973; Badcock 1993).

The first round of the Building Better Cities Program ran until 1995 and invested \$816 million of Federal funds in a miscellany of urban and regional land-use and infrastructure projects (see Nielsen 2008). Most of the Building Better Cities effort was undertaken via 26 spatially targeted 'area strategies' that tied urban land-use re-development to local infrastructure upgrades, with urban consolidation appearing as a consistent theme (Orchard 1999). For example, the redevelopment of Pyrmont/Ultimo in inner Sydney at higher densities was linked to a light rail scheme, as was a similar renewal scheme in Brisbane's inner north. Urban 'village' concepts were tested in East Perth and public transport station upgrades at Blacktown in Sydney and Dandenong in Melbourne were promoted to support their development as outer suburban centres. From 1995 the Building Better Cities (Mark II) frame shifted to link spatially targeted urban renewal to national infrastructure such as ports and airports (Orchard 1999). While funds were budgeted in 1995 the scheme was abandoned in 1996 following Labor's federal electoral defeat.

Reviewing the mode of intervention undertaken by the Commonwealth during the 1991-1996 Better Cities Program reveals significant differences from the previous Whitlam period. Whereas the Whitlam urban program was marked by a bold experimental ethos pressed via a strong urban agency in the form of DURD, the Building Better Cities program was auspiced via a conventional departmental arrangement, in the form of the Department of Housing and Regional Development. And while the DURD programs were focused on a small set of intervention types – land commissions, growth centres and sewerage – the BBCP schemes involved 26 area based 'improvements' that included miscellany of public and community housing, urban consolidation projects, open space, industrial land conversion, heavy and light rail and tramway links, bicycle paths, sewerage and flood mitigation works. This dispersed approach partly reflected the transition in Commonwealth urban purpose between DURD and the Better Cities program. The former had as its major focus the redress of social justice issues not adequately managed in the welfarist efforts of the post-War housing programs, but with a view to combining these with economic efficiency concerns around metropolitan land markets and spatial functionality, particularly in outer and fringe zones. Better Cities soon placed the economic efficiency objectives above those of social justice. The latter program's efforts tended to further facilitate market driven urban restructuring processes

² The literature is inconsistent on this subtle point. Badcock for example describes the shift from Better Cities Program to the Building Better Cities Program whereas Nielsen describes the entire 1991-1996 program as Building Better Cities. Many commentators refer to the 1991-1996 entire program as Better Cities (Orchard 1999). Orchard (1999) also describes a Better Cities Strategy and a Better Cities Program. The ANAO refers to just a single Better Cities Program. These inconsistencies perhaps reflect some of the contradictions in these policies as well as the changes made to the original program intent.

enabled by the wider Commonwealth national deregulation and competition agenda of the 1980s and 1990s. Urban renewal, for example, helped reinvigorate inner urban property markets, though with limited long-run social justice benefits.

National Urban Policy

Since 2007 the Australian government has pursued a program of national urban policy development which has produced a substantial volume of policy material accompanied by a large program of major infrastructure investment. This National Urban Policy period, which dates from 2007 can be distinguished from previous Federal attempts at national level intervention in cities both in terms of content and the strategic policy approach. For the first time national level urban policy has been articulated deliberately and systematically via the governance capabilities provided by the Federal-state hierarchy rather than in spite of these, or on an ad hoc basis. Yet despite its ambitious and distinctive objectives and methods, the National Urban Policy necessarily suffers from a number of weaknesses which have limited its impact on the trajectory of Australian cities and their patterns of urbanisation. Many of these weaknesses reflect the tensions between the Commonwealth power over fiscal, capital and population flows and the State's urban management and delivery roles.

During the 1990s and early 2000s the problems inherent to this Australian division of fiscal and spatial powers became increasingly manifest. Historically low interest rates set by the Commonwealth from the late-1990s facilitated an urban investment boom, particularly rapid house price inflation. Housing affordability became a significant problem for the states both in enabling sufficient investment in new urban residential stock, managing its spatial distribution and provisioning with infrastructure. Rapid population growth also stressed existing infrastructure networks, particularly roads and rail systems, leading to rising complaint about vehicle and passenger congestion. In response to these various challenges leading up to the 2007 federal election the Labor Party put forward an extensive platform involving discussion of and around urban policy (ALP 2007) which upon election it set about implementing. The following discussion focuses on the infrastructure and national urban policy components but leaves out many other related and peripheral policy strands, particularly those relating to housing and regional development.

The largest and most prominent program of urban policy has concerned infrastructure with multiple institutional and funding components established around the planning, coordination and financing of urban infrastructure under the auspices of the Department Infrastructure and Transport (DIT) via the statutory body Infrastructure Australia (IA). The IA agency was established in 2008 and has since built a new architecture for infrastructure development which seeks to make the selection, delivery and funding of infrastructure more coherent and integrated both between the Commonwealth and the States and between the public and private sectors. This initially involved an audit of Australia's infrastructure position, key national challenges and means of responding, plus an appropriate institutional framework for doing so (Infrastructure Australia 2008). Next has been the development of a framework for prioritising infrastructure investment plus alternative financing models and mechanisms for the delivery of infrastructure selected under the IA program, including both contributions from other tiers of government and the private sector. These arrangements would have been moot however, without a \$20 billion program of capital investment.

The second major component of the post-2007 urban policy landscape has been the National Urban Policy, Australia's first to be badged as such (DIT 2011). Although the National Urban Policy was only released in 2011 it is proposed as the mid-point in a longer run program of policy coordination between State metropolitan planning systems and Federal policy and funding. The federal motivation for developing a national urban policy stems from the recognition that many federal interests are shaped and influenced by urban conditions and that there is thus a federal imperative in ensuring better management of major cities. Major factors include the role of cities in shaping national economic productivity, the influence of urban liveability on a range of national wellbeing and social outcomes, and the significance of cities as sites of environmental consumption, particularly carbon emissions .

The process for developing a new national urban policy framework was initially harnessed to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) structure as a national reform agenda. Via COAG the Commonwealth

and the States collectively identified uniform principles for urban planning, focusing on metropolitan strategic planning as the critical policy scale for such principles to be applied. These principles, with explanatory material were released as the formal 2011 National Urban Policy (DIT 2011). Having established these principles the COAG reform council then audited the metropolitan strategies for each of the eight State or Territory capital cities to test their adherence or lack thereof (COAG Reform Council 2012). In the next phase of the process, which is ongoing, the States are to revise their relevant metropolitan strategy so that it aligns with the national level policy principles.

Appraising the National Urban Policy

The NUP model contrasts with previous Commonwealth urban policy efforts across multiple dimensions, including strategic purpose and mode of delivery. There is no single dedicated delivery agency, as was the case with Whitlam's Department of Urban and Regional Development; the Major Cities Unit, which is the key policy development entity sits within the Department of Infrastructure and Transport but has few program powers. While the wider urban policy framework involves infrastructure investment, this is very different to that under the 1991-1996 Building Better Cities program in that it is a long run framework for Commonwealth infrastructure investment but not wider urban redevelopment schemes. In essence the NUP seeks to establish a clear policy rationale for a Commonwealth interest in cities and then use the federal arrangements as a mechanism for applying this policy within each State or Territory jurisdiction. Within the Commonwealth itself however further effort is being undertaken via the wider NUP process to establish a longer lasting interest in urban affairs than is the case with a stand alone department as under DURD, which risks conflict with other agencies and is easily abolished and any policy with it. Likewise the NUP process differs from a project based spending program, as was the case with Better Cities, which effectively ended once the budget was cut, and thus had little longer term impact on policy. A substantial institutional architecture of department, inter-departmental committee, statutory agency, advisory unit, and standing inter-governmental advisory committee has been established in the form of, respectively, the Department of Infrastructure and Transport, the GCOC, Infrastructure Australia, the Major Cities Unit within DIT, and the Standing Council on Transport and Infrastructure (SCOTI) plus further less significant agencies and committees (Figure 1). Part of the intent of these arrangements seems to be to embed urban questions, particularly infrastructure considerations, in a wider array of institutional sites than just a single agency or program within an agency, as was the case with the Whitlam DURD program or the Better Cities Program. This presumably would make it harder for urban issues to fall off a future government agenda.

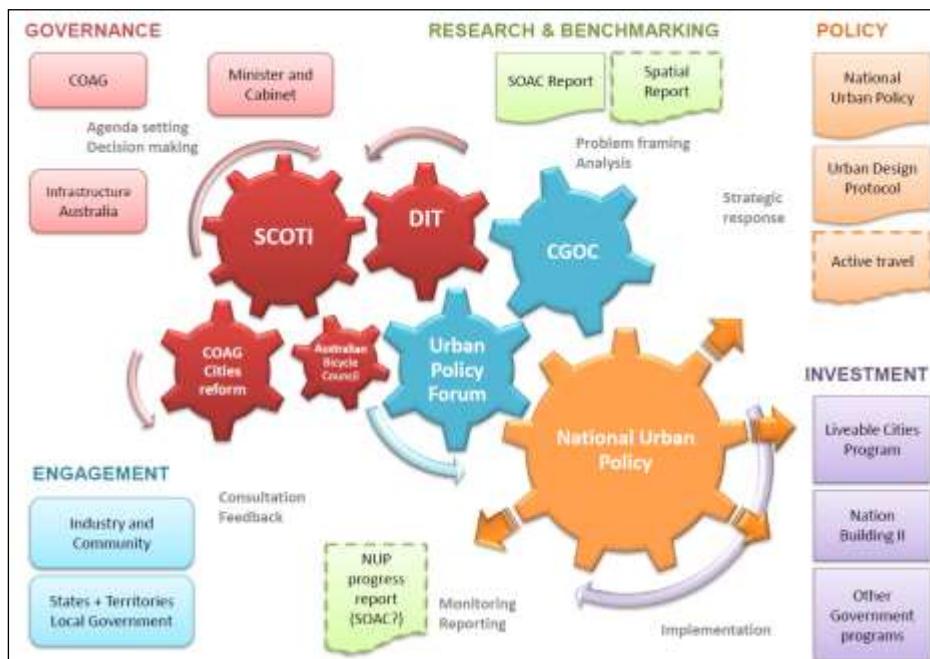


Figure 1: The national urban policy arrangements (Major Cities Unit 2012).

A final pertinent question around the National Urban Policy program since 2007 is whether it has made an appreciable difference to metropolitan planning outcomes. Certainly the infrastructure program has ensured a number of major transport infrastructure projects, particularly public transport links such as the Gold Coast Rapid Transit light rail, might not otherwise have proceeded. The National Urban Policy is ambitious, yet also often overly general in its stance, such that a reasonable concern can be raised over whether the content required to offer a national level degree of oversight, plus the need to cooperate with rather than dictate to the States has left the policy as an earnest in intent but weak in application. The very slow timeframes for national level planning principles to filter through State reviews of metropolitan strategic plans would seem to exemplify this concern, particularly where new State governments have been elected with platforms that seek to weaken metropolitan level planning. On current timeframes we may not see the rollout of the first NUP compliant metropolitan plans until 2015, more than half a decade after the announcement of the NUP itself, and these will take at least that period again to begin to have appreciable effect on their city. And given the significance of the States to the achievement of planning change, there is a risk that the NUP remains a Commonwealth preoccupation with little substantive influence at the metropolitan scale.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to examine Australia's post-2007 national urban policy program as a case study that can aid understanding of national-level urban policy. The paper has shown that the current mode of national urban policy differs from previous periods in intent, and mode of delivery. Second, the paper has raised the concern that although it seeks a more systemic embedding of urban thinking within Commonwealth governmental organs this deliberative and constructive approach has been at the expense of rapid or transformative action. The status of the National Urban Policy, other than infrastructure spending, remains fragile both within the Commonwealth structures, and within wider Commonwealth-State arrangements. Previous Commonwealth urban policies certainly left their mark, though perhaps with less durability than intended. Although the current National Urban Policy has established some breadth of scope, and depth in terms of infrastructure development, its longer term impact and durability also remain uncertain. Strengthening of policy and its implementation will be needed if the Commonwealth is to effect sustained changes to the functioning of Australia's major cities, in the national economic, social and environmental interest. From a research perspective there is value in greater historical evaluation of the development of national level urban policy in Australia particularly in applying greater analytical rigour to the historical material, while identifying the long-run effects of urban interventions. A particular question continues to revolve around the nature of policy 'reform' – regulatory, institutional, taxation -- versus investment and whether more is needed to shift the way Australia's major cities function than simply spending on infrastructure and services, and the key policy levers by which such a shift might occur.

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