

BANKSTOWN CITY SILVER JUBILEE
P J Keating
Bankstown Town Hall
Sydney
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Paul Keating was invited to give the keynote address to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the City of Bankstown. He accepted the invitation as the former Federal Member of Parliament for the area for 27 years and as a resident of Bankstown for 39 years. In the address he canvasses the cultural changes in Western Sydney while commenting on wider development issues within the Sydney Basin.

I am exceptionally pleased to be back in Bankstown on this, the twenty-fifth anniversary of its becoming a city. I remember that occasion 25 years ago, when many of us interested in the civic affairs of Bankstown regarded its new city status as some kind of compliment invested in all of us who lived here.

And if you had lived here a long time, as I had, and many before me, you understood what a compliment it was.

When I grew up in Bankstown in the 1950s, every amenity was basic. With the singular exception of the Bankstown Olympic Swimming Pool, which a later council filled in, most of the roads were without kerb and gutter and the homes without sewer.

The municipal sanitary cart was the brunt of hundreds of jokes which one could reel off like leaves from a ream of paper. And the sports ovals, save for one or two, were open patches of clay which increased one's incentive not to fall over or be tackled.

But for all that, Bankstown had something about it which marked it out from the urban sprawl. It was as if it had a ring around it and within this ring was a group of people with a very enhanced sense of community and an equally shared sense of obligation. A camaraderie or esprit de corps of a kind that all too few communities are blessed with.

And while there were many remarkable people, the most interesting thing about Bankstown was the importance and value of the many who went unremarked upon. The mums and dads, the teachers, the helpers, the communitarians, the volunteer ambulance, the volunteer first-aid, the youth sports administrators, the coaches. The list goes on.

Of course, we've had more than our share of those who've hit the high spots. Not just in Bankstown terms, but in national terms. Some in international terms.

The Waugh twins, as I said in an earlier speech, at cricket, simply the best in the world. Another set of twins, the Konrads, who came here from Latvia, and broke every Olympic record they contested. And latterly, Ian Thorpe, who carries on this high tradition. To them we can add Kevin Berry and Sandra Morgan and great coaches like Don Talbot and Forbes Carlisle and Frank Jordan.

Or great administrators like Nobby Clark who built the modern National Australia Bank. Or Ken Cowley who built News Limited over a couple of decades. And Bert Evans who fashioned the Metal Trades Industry Association into one of the most progressive organisations in the country.

Not to mention the long-serving mayors like Ron Lockwood and Doug Carruthers, along with more contemporary successors.

Bankstown had a Premier too, in Jim McGirr and, of course, a Prime Minister in me.

I lived in Bankstown until I went to Canberra as Treasurer of the Commonwealth at the age of 39. When I was living in The Lodge, John Howard, as Opposition Leader, was cheeky enough to say I needed a Gregory's to find my way home. A bit of poor man's hyperbole which was struck down by a journalist who made the observation, 'You can take the boy out of Bankstown, but you can't take Bankstown out of the boy', which was, of course, true.

Unlike John Howard, I came from a community who had nothing to sell but its labour and its people's time. As far as I was concerned, the shysters and the spivs could be represented by somebody else, but not by me. I always regarded my role in public life as being tested by what measure I advanced the common cause of ordinary people's lives. The people who lived here. Whether it was access and equity in health or access and equity in education or the right to a living wage and employment opportunities or superannuation, these were the coordinates that governed my political imperatives.

To whatever extent Australia flowered in the blush of its multiculturalism under the postwar migration program, in Bankstown it was a harvest. As a member of the Anglo-Irish community who settled Bankstown in the first half of the twentieth century I grew up with kids who were born in Holland, Italy, Malta, Germany, the Baltic States, as well as the newcomers from the British Isles. By the time I entered the House of Representatives, you could add Vietnam and Lebanon and some other places to that august roll-call.

I can recall South Terrace Bankstown, on the southern side of the railway line, where businesses bearing the names of HG Palmer, Nock and Kirby's, Woolworth's, Centreway Cakes, Adler's Hardware, City Price Radio and Hackett's Haberdashery, had given away to stores which carried business names only in Vietnamese. Such was the cultural transformation. And great places of congregation like the Bankstown Sports Club and the Bankstown RSL Club and the many such clubs in the satellite suburbs of Bankstown reflected the area's social and cultural milieu. The kind of milieu, I might say, to this day, John Howard does not understand. Or, might I add, accept.

Bankstown saw the monoculture come and it saw it go. And the place was the richer and the stronger for it.

These days, of course, Bankstown is relatively inner city; in my day, it was on the periphery of the sprawl. From Bankstown I used to bike it, every weekend, to all manner of places. West to Warragamba, south-east to Cronulla, and south to Bulli. A mate and I would often attach ourselves to the back of a truck going up the Bulli Pass, cadging a free ride to the top, cigarette in hand. You could not do that today and live to tell the story. Life was more simple then.

Now, the places I used to ride to and through are covered by McMansions and tartaned by expressways. Now in western Sydney, you do need your Gregory's; John Howard would need a pocket GPS device. Of course, there is no cultural equivalent of those geographic diviners for him, save for some back edition of the Boys' Own Annual or the Baden-Powell Guide to the Outdoors.

Western Sydney now provides one of the greatest challenges to the country. To our great Commonwealth. Forty per cent of Australia's GDP is created in the greater metropolis of Sydney, that which lies between Newcastle and Wollongong. But we know that Sydney is landlocked between the Pacific and the Blue Mountains and that we have a choice about whether we keep the great green spaces yet house more people or whether we carpet-lay it with endless permutations on the McMansion model. Rewarding all those dairy farmers who have lived long enough to see their rezoned land blast them to the top of Australia's rich list.

An architect friend of mine, Peter Myers, calls this opportunity 'the Third City'. The First City was the place lived in and frequented by Aboriginal people, distinguished by shell-midden mounds of the scale and of the kind which existed at Bennelong Point.

In Myers' concept, the Second City is the one we created between European settlement and now. Victorian, Edwardian, modern, postmodern.

And the Third City is the new city: the emerald jewel which holds out the promise of a more sympathetic settlement with nature, giving those to the west and northwest of the city a sense of community and lifestyle choices of a kind many in the outer Second City never had.

These days, Sydney grows at a rate of about a thousand people a week. Families are getting smaller and the change in household composition has meant that about 100,000 homes have been built in the last twenty years to accommodate roughly the same number of people. For each of the next ten years, Sydney will need roughly twenty to twenty-five thousand new homes. We need to give these people not just accommodation, but choice and affordability without blotting out our landscape with mindless, massive brick-skinned vaults of a kind which many project builders provide with both pride and alacrity.

You might have gathered from the few references so far that I have an exceedingly low opinion of McMansions. And their block-straddling, vacuous ordinariness.

Encouragingly, the NSW Government of Bob Carr is turning its attention to this huge issue. Its Planning Minister Craig Knowles's proposed Metropolitan Strategy holds out the promise of doing things differently: weaving in a requirement on infrastructure agencies, such as the RTA and the rail authorities, to coordinate their rollouts in the context of land-release programs, sustainability targets and the provision of social infrastructure.

I believe what we need is more attractive medium-density housing, in the context of more open space, serviced by adequate transport and social infrastructure, with points of congregation that give people some more adequate feelings of belonging. If not in every place, a village concept, something nearer to the High Street, where access is less dependent on motor vehicles. Including and especially those four-wheel drives.

Where the government goes with its transport and social infrastructure, so goes increased value of land holdings and property. And in the context of property being rezoned, the enhanced development value has to be siphoned down such that the necessary infrastructure can be provided. Other than seeing people marooned in extensive housing estates with little to bind them and even less to service them.

Without some greater metropolitan plan, the city's future will fall prey to cameo property rezonings and extraordinary development applications designed mostly to make their proponents rich. God knows, Sydney has had enough of that.

Something better, I might also say, includes revitalising some of our older suburbs, which the government is attempting to do, with proposals which include improved residential building and design, and which recognises the importance of corridors for linking communities within the suburban matrix.

The natural boundary of the Sydney Basin, circumscribed as it is by its geography, means that over time, in terms of population pressure, Sydney will have to make a more effective throw to Newcastle and to the south.

Newcastle and its attractive environs, the great valley to its hinterland, provides an enormous opportunity to ease settlement pressures within the Sydney Basin. This can only effectively be undertaken with a new piece of infrastructure. That is, a very fast train connecting the central business districts of the two cities. In this way, Novocastrians can find quick and easy access to the city of Sydney, while Sydneysiders can view Newcastle and the Hunter as a place of options that can be enjoyed other than by a three-hour car trip or a ride in the historic rail corridor.

Some quite important person said to me, 'But it's all sandstone in between' to which I replied, sympathetically, 'That's right, but it's not going to go away, so the earlier we hop into it the better'.

Bear in mind that Sydney's suburban development was built around the hub-and-spokes network of our rail system, a system built mostly in the 1920s when we were as poor as church mice. And we have been living on it ever since.

In this day and age, in this period of such great wealth, is it really inconceivable that we cannot build a rapid line to Newcastle? Or even do it on the balance sheet of the State's public accounts?

Public policy choices should be made without reference to the marauding gangs of investment bankers and fund managers who glare, King Kong-like, over the most propitious bits of the city's landscape.

I hope we are not forever condemned to have things which are only of interest to organisations like the Macquarie Banks of this world or avian extractors of value like Max Moore-Mascot and his new private monopoly.

The internationalisation of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s by the Labor government that I had the privilege to both serve and lead opened up vistas of opportunities like no other in the twentieth century. The diminished expectations and means of the past, even that which obtained in 1980, the year of Bankstown's city-bestowed status, seems, in the new world now, like aeons ago.

Our children now come to a world with education and opportunity, such a cry away from the relative poverty which attended frontier communities like Bankstown, when social binding and interdependence were almost the only thing upon which people could reliably depend and trust.

Bankstown's twenty-fifth anniversary, is in many respects, a very big story. A story of the new Australia: the Australia of tolerance and diversity, the Australia of growth, wealth and opportunity. But it is even more than that. It is a story of what we have become and what, with some imagination, courage and forbearance, we might aspire to.

On behalf of the community of Bankstown and its environs, I congratulate the Mayor, Helen Westwood, her fellow councillors and officers and the many out there in the streets who ask for little but believe in so much.