CATALYIST FORUM: ENGAGING WITH LABOR IN POWER
Panel: A new vision, A new agenda

'PLANNING ON AN EQUITABLE FUTURE'

Dr Gabrielle Gwyther   25 August 2008
Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre   Wesley Centre
University of Western Sydney   220 Pitt St, Sydney
Email: g.gwyther@uws.edu.au

On 27 May, 2008 Camden Council voted unanimously 'on planning grounds' to reject the Quranic Society's development application for a $19 million Islamic School in Camden. Local residents were triumphant at this turn of events in their campaign of cultural protectionism. Believing that the Islamic school was a cultural incursion too far, the hostilities had become vocal, offensive and at times vicious with the late-night staking of two bloody pigs' heads at the school site, alongside an Australian flag. Upon their triumph one resident in particular claimed her 15 minutes of fame, declaring "the ones that come here oppress our society, they take our welfare and they don't want to accept our way of life" (McCulloch cited Murphy, 2008: 1).

Calling on the name of Macarthur, Camden's most historically prominent, colonialist family, however, was clearly paradoxical. "The Macarthurs will be proud of us", she declared, much to the chagrin of some of the Macarthur descendents, who in their rebuttal showed a depth of understanding and clarity that was all but missing outside Camden Council Chambers that night. "No one can say what their reaction would have been", they wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "But we can say that they were first-generation Australians who sought to continue to honour their cultural heritage in a new place and valued education for their children" (Finlay and Macnell family, 2008: 12). Touché!

The Camden / Quranic conundrum alludes to a number of issues arising from the diversity and complexity of our contemporary urban spaces. It raises concern for trust and social cohesion in a heterogenous society. It queries our seeming acceptance of socio, political and economic disparity following a 'decade of

economic growth' and neo-Liberal hegemony. It reveals the housing, infrastructure and employment pressures associated with population growth, especially in lower socio-economic regions like south-west Sydney. In the absence of a Federal urban governance agenda, in conjunction with the practice of wedge politics since 1996, it is hardly surprising that these issues have intensified in recent years.

In these few moments I want to briefly discuss where some of these issues derive and how they play out on the cultural and social landscape of 'Western Sydney'. The themes of social disadvantage, cultural incursion and ham-fisted, frequently self-seeking government policies are integral to the historical narrative of western Sydney, as is the neglect of an effective, holistic approach to economic, cultural and ecological governance.

Western Sydney is an area of great complexity: of culture, language, personal histories, religion and interests. As the arse-end of global, glittering Sydney its issues are not well understood and its problems are often ignored by governments, brushed under the carpet, or solved by stealth.

The development of the 'Western Sydney' identity coincided in the post-War period with the rise of the consumer society, and the ensuing socio-economic cleavages subsequent consumption patterns created. With its propensity for low density and cheap housing western Sydney was the solution to the slum clearance programs of the inner city and the mass influx of low skilled, post-war migrants.

From the outset 'Western Sydney' was a signifier of low income, low education, homogeneity and disadvantage. The flannel wearing, stubby holding 'Westie' developed as a rhetorical devise to designate the 'other' Sydney: spatially, culturally and economically different from the more prosperous and privileged Sydneysiders of the north and east. 'Westie' was a term of division and derision, and became shorthand for a population considered lowbrow, coarse and lacking aspiration and cultural refinement. In a society striving to project itself as monocultural, the term ignored non-English speaking migrants and disregarded their experience.

Whether part of the 'European wave' of migration under Assimilation Policy in the immediate post-War period or the 'non-European wave' under multiculturalism from the mid 1970s, migration settlement patterns have at least one thing in common: better skilled, more highly resourced ethnic groups settled in Sydney's better healed northern and eastern suburbs; while unskilled, poorly resourced migrants made their homes in the suburbs of west and south-west Sydney.

From 1975, the settlement of relatively unskilled, non-English speaking and often traumatized Indochinese in already struggling suburbs of south-west Sydney challenged the notion of what it was to be Australian. They unwittingly confronted the suburban status quo through their concentrated settlement patterns, Asian appearance and languages, religious festivals and temples, non-English shop signage, and the fear of drug lords and 'triads'. During the 1980s and 90s the media exploited the fear and exoticism of Vietnamese criminality through its fetish like focus on Cabramatta.

September 11, however, brought some much needed relief to residents of Cabramatta as the media refocused its attention on the Muslim 'problem' in Bankstown. Lebanese Muslims began settling in the Canterbury Bankstown area in the mid 1970s, in the wake of civil unrest in Lebanon. Arriving mainly under the Family Reunion scheme, many lacked the education of their Christian compatriots, and today are still likely to be employed in unskilled jobs or in fact, to be unemployed (Collins, 2005). The jobs they – along with other low skilled, non-English speaking migrants - might have been expected to take up all but disappeared in the 'new economy'. These families remain overly represented amongst the poor and low-income households in Australia (Collins, 2005).

Racism is a major force in the lives of Australian Lebanese and even more so for young, second generation Muslim men, many of whom have responded by adopting a type of 'ethnic masculinity'. According to Poynting, Tabar and Noble (2005: 218), "this involves asserting what for them constitute their Lebaneseness in Australia, and doing so with a good deal of male aggression, often directed at authority figures from the 'mainstream' culture which are implicated in institutional racism". However, it

also suits us to view problems involving young Muslim men from a cultural / ethnic perspective and ignore the importance of their economic and social marginalisation.

From the early 1990s upwardly mobile, native born residents – many of whom were disparaged as 'Westies' in their youth - began decamping from suburbs most affected by cultural incursion, out to more homogenous suburbs on the urban fringe. This resettlement has been referred to as 'White Flight' (Latham, 2003). However, to apply this North American idiom to the western Sydney context is inflammatory and denies the complexity of forces encouraging the so called 'Aspirationals' to relocate to more homogeneous new estates on the urban fringe in suburbs such as Camden. Just as significant as the desire to move away from ethnic concentrations is the desire to move away from low-income neighbourhoods and disorderly public housing estates. These households also move out to the urban fringe in the expectation of securing better property returns with which to support their retirement; as well as to demonstrate their economic success and status through residential exclusivity.

Social cohesion requires a degree of security – ontological, physical and economic. This is one reason why the anxiety of residents of Camden should not be ignored. Nevertheless, economically vulnerable and marginalised groups also have the right to feel and *be* secure. This is both a social justice and an equity issue. Ensuring that locally based policies, structures and programs are primed to enable full 'social citizenship' with its economic, political and civic elements - is imperative. Education facilities which specifically support marginalised, ethnic minorities should be encouraged. Recent evidence indicates that Islamic private schools are just as interested in producing top HSC results and preparing students for a university education as any other private school.

Post-war Sydney has witnessed very little urban unrest compared to some European and American cities which have experienced the upheaval of ethnic succession and cultural reorganisation in the post-War period (Herman, 2005). Nevertheless, recent incidents that have occurred have at least one important feature in common; they involve socially, politically and economically marginalised youth (Collins, 2007), whether young Aboriginals in the 'Redfern riots' in 2004, the white, unemployed youth involved in the Macquarie Fields riots in February 2005, or the Muslim youth

butting up against the dominant culture in Cronulla in December 2005.' It is even more remarkable that a disparate region like western Sydney, with its social complexity, pockets of great social disadvantage and high proportion of first and second generation, non-English speaking migrants has in the main been able to maintain a sense of stability and social cohesion. Until recently, the development of western Sydney, with its propensity for low density and detached housing in conjunction with the systematic release of land on the urban fringe for lower income, residential development, has worked to alleviate suburban pressure points and population displacement.

In more recent times this 'settlement pattern' has been disrupted by the scarcity of new land releases; the displacement of first home-buyer subdivisions on the urban fringe with new housing estates designed for higher income and second and third home buyers; the residualisation of public housing estates due to a lack of Federal and State funding; and the lack of policies and support for low skilled migrants that just might have enabled them to claim a meaningful part of Australia's 'booming' economy.

Pressure also derives from western Sydney's signification of low status, low income, social dysfunction, ethnicity and disadvantage. It shouldn't be too surprising that evidence of social mobility such as the McMansion, is comprehensively disparaged by social commentators (see for instance Farrelly, 2007). Effort and ambition, usually regarded as positive attributes by the corporate class, become 'grasping and greedy' when applied to residents of western Sydney. Confirming and reaffirming western Sydney as the spatial and cultural 'other' has established it as a chimera against which the rest of Sydney could positively and confidently appraise itself (Gwyther, 2008). More importantly, however, this signification has consequences for the type and quality of government and private investment in the region.

It is crucial at this time that western Sydney is recognised as a region of great complexity; culturally rich and economically diverse. Urban planning should support the region's diverse socio-economic character through provision of employment opportunities, educational programs and cultural facilities that other parts of Sydney take for granted. Setting aside more land in south-west Sydney for 'distribution and

storage facilities' as part of the State Government's cryogenic metropolitan strategy, for instance, is part of the problem, not the solution. The region also needs creative education programs and well funded third-sector and government services to advance the social and economic inclusion of marginalised groups. At the Federal level western Sydney should no longer be considered as some lower socio-economic afterthought to global Sydney, but as a region in its own right, with its own specific character, attributes and issues.

But this requires a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of issues with which residents of western Sydney must contend, or for that matter any other lower socio-economic region or social group in Australia. Such fine grain governance, however, seems at odds with the hollow way politics is conducted in this seemingly never ending era of neo-liberalism - with its obsession with the market and individual self-sufficiency, its preferencing of a narrow middle-class ideal, and its deployment of moral underclass discourse ('mud'). Neo-liberalism has blinded us to the structural issues of our time and the fact that some individuals and groups are so deleteriously positioned within the socio-economic strata they inevitably experience 'mobility blockage'. Australia has ostensibly moved on from its pre-War monoculture. Perhaps it is time that our governments did too.

References:

Collins, J. (2005) From Beirut to Bankstown: The Lebanese Diaspora in Multicultural Australia. in Tabar, P. (Ed.) *Lebanese Diaspora: History, Racism and Belonging,* (Beirut: Lebanese American University), 187-212.

Collins, J. (2007) The Landmark of Cronulla. in Jupp, J., Nieuwenhuysen, J. & Dawson, E. (Eds.) *Social Cohesion in Australia,* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press), 61-69.

Farrelly, E. (2007) *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness, (*Sydney: University of New South Wales Press)

Finlay, H. & Macnell family (2008) Letters to the Editor, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* Sydney, 1, 2 June.

Gwyther, G. (2008) Once Were Westies, *Griffith Review: Cities on the Edge,* 20 (May).

Herman, M. A. (2005) *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Twentieth-Century America, (*New York: Peter Lang)

Latham, M. (2003) *From the Suburbs: Building a Nation from our Neighbourhoods,* *(*Annandale: Pluto Press Australia)

Murphy, D. (2008) Am I the new Pauline Hanson? I Hope So, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* Sydney, 31 May – 1 June

Poynting, S., Tabar, P. & Noble, G. (2005) Representations of youth in Sydney: A Critique of Liberal Rhetoric about young Lebanese Immigrants in Tabar, P. (Ed.) *Lebanese Diaspora: History, Racism and Belongong,* (Beirut: Lebanese American University), 213-249.