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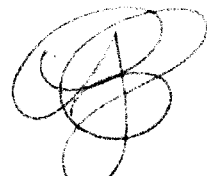
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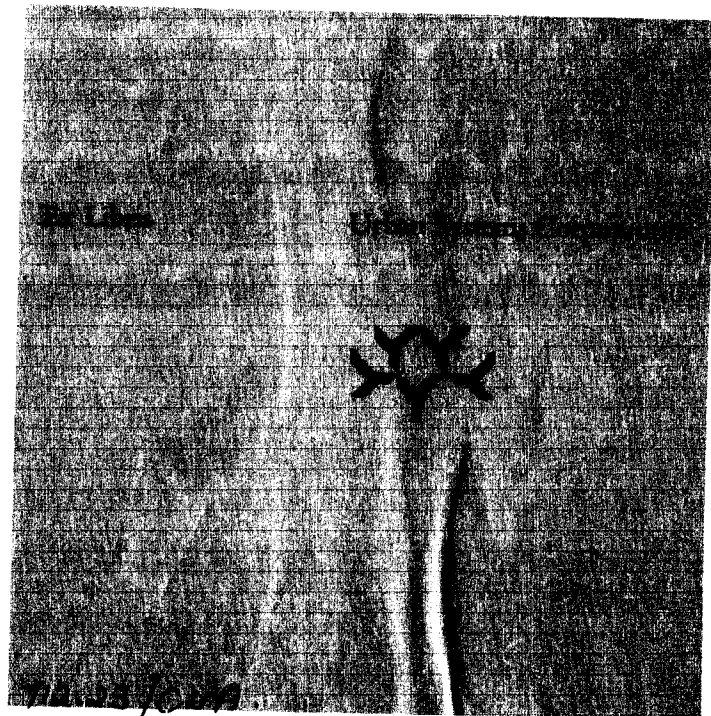
By W. George Clarke

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By W. George Clarke*

Policy Conflicts In The Green Belt Controversy

Controversies concerning the "Green Belt" in Sydney over the past decade have been waged not simply on one major issue but on a complexity of differing yet related issues. The different matters at stake have become frustratingly confused, not only in the minds of mere members of the public, but also in the minds of those most closely connected with the setting of policies and the making of administrative decisions.

Most people who have taken part in the controversy and discussion have been under some kind of immediate stress, of either a political, administrative, personal or profit-seeking nature. They have not had the time, nor always the inclination, to try to clarify issues through exhaustive discussion. They have in fact often been at pains to over-simplify the issues involved, with the aim of winning some immediate and limited objective.

The great majority of the metropolitan population have been onlookers in the controversy. They have often been bewildered by claims and counter-claims which are truly at cross-purposes. Some citizens have become entranced by splendid visions of what could be, only to be dismayed and discouraged because the vision cannot be immediately realised. The consequent apathy is difficult to dispel because the Green Belt question appears to have become almost a private matter between some property owners and subdividers; the Cumberland County Council, local Councils and the Ministry for Local Government. The County Council is the Responsible Authority for metropolitan planning, but it is comprised of delegates from local Councils and is not itself directly elected by the voters. While this indirect system has much to recommend it, there is little opportunity in it to allow major policy issues such as that presented by the Green Belt concept to be effectively presented and debated as an election issue before the metropolitan public. In con-

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sequence, a matter of such importance as the direction and shape of metropolitan expansion tends not to be sufficiently explained or discussed in public.

Nevertheless, people continue to write letters to the newspapers complaining of their unlit suburban streets, their potholed roads, their lack of footpaths and sewerage, their poor public transport services, their high rates, and their lack of social facilities, without being aware that these very concrete problems are among those which the Green Belt policy tries to solve, or at least to alleviate. On the other hand, however, the "Green Belt" tends to be ignorantly made the scapegoat for all kinds of irrelevant troubles, such as the high price of land, or the housing shortage, or even the fact that Melbourne appears to be growing faster than Sydney.

This article is an attempt to clarify the issues involved in metropolitan planning and the Green Belt controversy. The chronology of official action on the matter between 1945 and 1956 has already been excellently covered by Professor Denis Winston's book, *Sydney's Great Experiment*, published by Angus and Robertson in 1957. I will try to elucidate what appears to have happened in the last three years, culminating in the current and ostensibly final releases of between 50 and 60 square miles of Green Belt for urban development. I will try to summarise the major conflicts between various interests and policies which have constituted the ten year controversy.

Metropolitan land-use planning was introduced to New South Wales in 1945 as one of the aspirations of "post-war reconstruction". There was a general willingness to concede the need for planned resource-allocation at all levels—local, regional, state and national. The Cumberland County Council was set up to prepare a plan for the Sydney region, an area of 1,630 square miles, containing a population which reached 1,700,000 by 1947, when the plan was two-thirds prepared. The completed Plan was presented to the Minister for Local Government in 1948 and was adopted by State Parliament in 1951. It showed a pattern of zoned Living Areas sufficient to provide for a total population of between 2,350,000 and 2,400,000, a capacity for increase of about six or seven hundred thousand people. This increase was envisaged as being spread over 25 years and this time-estimate was based on the best demographic advice then available.

Surrounding the pink-coloured Living Areas of the main suburban masses was a light-green belt curving from Kuring-gai Chase

on the North to the Military Reserve and the National Park on the South. This was the "Green Belt" Zone. It was to form part of "a broad rural background" to the city and suburbs. Land-use in the Green Belt Zone was subject to exactly the same restrictions as land in the Rural Zone further out. The only difference between land-use control in the brown-coloured Rural Zone and the light-green Green Belt Zone has been that the former areas have been administered by the local Shire Councils, while the Green Belt area has been administered by the County Council. The Green Belt was originally thought of as "an inner rural zone subject to special aesthetic treatment and protection of its rural character from promiscuous urbanisation", and was shaped to form a "girdle of rural open space encircling the urban districts and penetrating towards the centre between some of the outer districts, ensuring for all time ready access by urban populations to a countryside specially planned and maintained for their benefit."¹ This somewhat ambiguously conceived piece of "rural open space" has been administered by a metropolitan authority because the functions it was designed to fulfil have metropolitan significance.

These functions of metropolitan significance have subsequently been defined as follows:—"The aim of the Green Belt is threefold: firstly, to set a limit to the area of urban development, prevent further unnecessary subdivision of bush or agricultural land, and encourage the filling up of as yet unused building lots in the Living Areas thus producing a more compact form of development and making possible the better provision of roads, sewers, and other public services; secondly, to bring fresh air and unspoiled countryside within reach of as many urban dwellers as possible and prevent the dangerous and uneconomic ribboning of the main highways with building developments; thirdly, to provide within convenient distance of the city adequate sites for hospitals and other institutions requiring large areas of land around them."²

The original (1948) County Scheme was indeed a bold experiment. The planners had hoped to receive Commonwealth financial assistance in carrying it out; they had planned accordingly and the plan had to be cut when that assistance was refused. The planners had hoped that governments would act affectively to bring about major decentralisation away from the capital cities; they have hoped that Sydney could be limited in area by the Green Belt

¹ County of Cumberland Planning Scheme Report 1948, pp. 65 and 129.

² Winston, Denis: *Sydney's Great Experiment*, p. 45.

and have been reluctant to immediately plan satellite towns outside the Green Belt (but within the boundaries of the County of Cumberland) because they believed that the State Government should act on a large scale to create major satellite cities between fifty and two hundred miles away from Sydney.

When the Plan was adopted by State Parliament in 1951, much development had already taken place in some sections of the Green Belt and widespread pieces of it had to be released for urban development. The problem of precise delineation of the Green Belt boundaries continued to be a vexatious one for many years and a major "review" of the Zone was carried out and presented to the Minister in 1956. Complete land-use, subdivision and soil type surveys were made and a "final" definition of the Zone was drawn, involving releases of some further areas for urban development.

The main item of controversy at this time was the injurious effect that Green Belt zoning was having upon the value of land covered by it. The relatively sudden and ostensibly final denial of future potential residential subdivision value to bush and farmland on the metropolitan fringe was hotly contested. But in November, 1956, this controversy was scotched, if not completely killed, by the decision of the Land and Valuation Court that the Statute excluded compensation where an estate or interest in land was affected by those provisions of the Scheme which prescribed the "use of buildings, the character of buildings or the space about buildings." Mr. Justice Sugerman ruled that the 5 acre minimum subdivision requirement in the Green Belt Zone was a provision regulating the "use and character" of buildings.

Around this time the Green Belt concept appeared to be working out well. Property owners living in the Zone grew adjusted to their situation and many were prepared to support the idea that their rural environment should be protected. The ruling on compensation appeared to dispose of what had seemed to be the main objection to the Green Belt concept. Perhaps, however, the waters of opposition were merely forced underground, to bide their time until other tides arose to threaten the urban dam. The tide that was finally to swamp most of the Green Belt appears to have begun rising in June, 1957. The population within the then-existing Living Area Zones in the County contained at that date an estimated population of 1,953,300. The total population capacity of these zones was then estimated by the Cumberland County Council at

2,411,000, which meant that there was a margin for increase of about 530,000 people.

The County had been growing at an average rate of about 35,000 people per annum over the previous ten years and so there seemed to be a margin for about 13 year's growth within the existing Living Areas, not counting whatever population increases might occur through redevelopment of the decayed inner suburbs, which were becoming ever more ripe for rebuilding. In the face of rapid growth and expansive thinking, however, it was difficult to convince many people that these estimates were either accurate or meaningful. People must have a choice of building blocks, some would say, while others would point out that people like to buy a block of land many years before they will be able to afford to build on it, and that they should be allowed to do so. Therefore, it may not be meaningful simply to divide the acres of existing vacant Living Area Zone by an average number of houses per net acre and then say that there is a thirteen year capacity for increase. And even if there were in fact no real shortage of land, a widespread belief that urban land was in short supply was gaining ground.

Perhaps the strongest conviction that urban land was in desperately short supply came to be held by the N.S.W. Minister for Housing. For years past, the County Council has been propagating the idea that when the existing Living Areas inside the Green Belt came to be near full development, then satellite towns should be built beyond the Green Belt. The Council had as early as 1955 announced that Campbelltown was an ideal site for a satellite city, and had begun preliminary research to discover the best patterns of metropolitan expansion in the Rural Zones outside the Green Belt. Mr. Landa, the Housing Minister, went on an overseas visit in 1956/57 to see European examples for himself. He saw the English New Towns and he even saw Vallingby, the satellite suburban centre outside Stockholm. He announced that the Housing Commission would build a "satellite town" for 60,000 people at Minto, between Liverpool and Campbelltown. He asked the County Council to release the land for urban development.

The County Council refused. Their grounds were that the scheme was premature, that the Housing Commission should concentrate on vacant areas still within the existing Living Areas, inside the Green Belt fence. The Housing Commission replied that this land was only in small parcels, and that it was too expensive.

The County Council said that naturally it was more expensive than land at Minto; the zoned Living Area land in most cases had some streets, it had some water, electricity and transport services and could get sewerage within a reasonable period of time, while the Minto land had nothing, and would cost even more to service. Moreover, the County planners felt that Minto was unsuitable as a satellite town site, that it was too close to Liverpool and the main metropolitan mass, and that Campbelltown would be a better site.

The planners and many other people viewed with some alarm the idea of the N.S.W. Housing Commission building an entire town, because their standards of design had proved so uninspired in the past. In any case, it was a great disappointment to the Minister for Housing when State Cabinet refused to intervene and overrule the local government decision.³

Following the refusal of the Minto project, the Town and Country Planning Advisory Committee, the special Committee set up under Part XHIA of the Local Government Act to advise the Minister for Local Government, has played the major part in formulating policy on Green Belt and metropolitan expansion issues.

The Advisory Committee sits in private session to examine all planning schemes submitted to the Minister, and has wide powers to make enquiries. Its deliberations and its reports are, however, not made public.

The Advisory Committee reported in June, 1957, that the County Council's previous reviews of the Green Belt had not released enough new Living Area. But before action was taken on this recommendation, the County Council itself proposed additional releases, which were confirmed by the Minister.

In the meantime the County Council was preparing an ambitious research project entitled "The Economics of Urban Expansion". All that had previously been said about the wastefulness of urban sprawl was put to the test of mathematical computation. Published in December, 1958, the research project was the first major enquiry into the true social costs of low-density scatteration. It was the kind of research which could have been published widely in the press, and which could have provided a basis for informed

³ Three years after its first failure at Minto, the N.S.W. Commission is getting its chance to show what it can do in the way of really large scale development on a site at Hoxton Park, on land adjacent to Liverpool recently released from the Green Belt. Hoxton Park will not be a proper satellite; it will rather be a new suburb, attached to a finger of urban development coming down from Liverpool.

public discussion at a higher level than had previously been achieved. Regrettably, the report seems to have gone largely unnoticed.

Three hypothetical forms for the further expansion of Sydney over a twenty year period were compared in the report. Case A represents a continuation of the County Council policy of restricted zoning, with small annual expansion of Living Areas to maintain a constant 13 year capacity for increase. Case B represents the virtual abandonment of all land-use restrictions and a return to the days of uncontrolled premature subdivisions. Case C represents the opposite extreme of no further outward expansion, growth being accommodated within existing Living Areas at higher densities.

The annual costs to the community of roads and drainage, sewerage, water supply, electricity and gas supply, street lighting, telephones, urban transport and building costs are calculated in each case. Total annual community costs would be lowest in Case C, even allowing for higher building costs at highest densities. The report also purported to show that any substantial releases of land for urban development as was envisaged in Case B, could cost an additional £43 per annum per household in the County over the cost involved in Case A, or else thousands of families would have to continue for many years with only the bare minimum of services. The report concludes:—"If we, in this country, insist on continuing to indulge in low-density housing, and at the same time want good living conditions in so far as they can be provided by adequate utility services and transport, we must be prepared to face the heavy cost."

This report did not, however, have any apparent effect in stemming the demands for even further releases from the Green Belt. It was as if Sydneysiders accepted the costs and inconveniences of sprawl and were determined to have more. The report on the un-economics of urban expansion certainly made no impression on the Minister for Housing who requested the Minister for Local Government to explain how and where the Housing Commission was to find "broad acres" for large housing estates. The Minister for Local Government therefore asked his Advisory Committee to undertake a comprehensive review of the urban zoning in the County Scheme. The Committee, sitting in camera, called witnesses from all sides to hear evidence and opinions about the future size and shape of Sydney urban area. Meanwhile, the Cumberland County Council also set about yet another overall review of the Green Belt Zoning, providing for the further release of 22 square miles, and submitted it to the Minister in October, 1959, just as the

Advisory Committee was beginning to think of its own report to the Minister.

A dramatic point was now reached. The Premier, Mr. J. J. Cahill, died, and in the resulting reshuffle of portfolios, the Ministry of Local Government went from Mr. Renshaw to Mr. P. D. Hills. Mr. Cahill had been the founder and patron of metropolitan planning in N.S.W. Mr. Renshaw had been a conservative Minister, not unsympathetic to the efforts of the County Council, but Mr. Hills, as an ex Lord Mayor of Sydney, brought to his new office a markedly different feeling. Mr. Hills had been hailed as a man of action, and he gave the impression of wishing to justify his reputation. The long drawn-out Green Belt question gave him an opportunity.

The situation at the time the Advisory Committee was making up its mind what to recommend to the new Minister was roughly as follows:—

- (i) The Housing Commission wanted large tracts of the cheapest possible land. The Commission's responsibility was, and is limited to paying for land, subdivision roads and the construction of houses. It is under pressure to maximise the number of dwelling units it can produce with its limited allocation of money. It has no responsibility for the overall and long-run social costs of the residential areas it constructs, which are paid for out of the community's general rate and tax funds, or else by the residents of the housing estates themselves.
- (ii) The swelling band of real estate subdividers and developers had become cynical about the ability of the County Council to continue to protect the Green Belt Zoning, and were taking up options on large tracts of land in the Green Belt, to hold them in reserve.
- (iii) The larger developers and the Minister for Housing had "satellite town fever". One developer wanted to build a satellite at Kellyville, in Rural areas to the North West, another near Penrith on the West, and yet another took over the Minto site and wanted to resuscitate the Housing Commission's idea.
- (iv) The local Councillors, property-owners and businessmen of the fringe Municipalities and Shires like Sutherland, Liverpool, and Baulkham Hills were growing increasingly restive

about what they felt was the "stranglehold" the Green Belt had on the future growth of their districts. Each felt that his suburb had a right to a glorious future, perhaps one day as a "city". This local feeling was continually being impressed upon State Members of Parliament who in turn brought pressure to bear upon the Minister for Local Government.

- (v) The economic boom was reaching exciting proportions and developers and development were capturing the public imagination. There was, and still is, a tremendous demand for land to be held as an investment (or speculation) and as a bulwark against inflation. Real Estate agents were ready to help people find land for investment purposes. The general public rushed to buy; it was believed that there was a desperate scarcity of building blocks of any kind.
- (vi) The Cumberland County Council rested in the belief that by recommending the release of 22 square miles, in addition to the 16 square miles it had previously released since 1951, it had provided for all the expansion that could reasonably be required for many years to come, and that the time would then be ripe to build a satellite city at Campbelltown. The County Council waited for its latest proposals to be vetted by the Advisory Committee and adopted by the Minister. The County planners discounted the murmurings of discontent coming from newspapers and the general public, and tended to feel that everything would receive its due consideration in due course.
- (vii) The Minister was naturally anxious to start off his term of office with a clean slate, uncluttered by the problems of his predecessor's term.
- (viii) For the first major occasion since the war, the professional planners tended to be divided on the question of what to do. A number of independent experts were called before the Advisory Committee's confidential sessions, and some were willing to agree that the County Council was dilatory and remiss in not acting promptly to assist the Housing Commission and to provide positively instead of vaguely for future expansion beyond the Green Belt. Professor Winston had written as early as 1956 that "If the continuous development of the outer fringe of Sydney is to be stopped by the Green Belt, provision must be made for development beyond the Green

Belt. The County Council may fairly be criticised that neither in the Scheme, nor during the years since that time, have clear-cut proposals been made for alternative developments of this type.⁴

The Advisory Committee reported to the Minister on December 15th, 1959, recommending the fixing of a "realistic" line as the inner perimeter of the Green Belt. The Minister decided to adopt the boundary with two slight modifications which added to the area to be released. In announcing the release the Minister said, "My determination will leave the Green Belt in a position which will not be further altered during my term as Minister and which I consider should, in the interests of good planning, remain permanently inviolate". The Minister made his announcement two or three days before Christmas. Councillor R. S. Luke, ex-Chairman of the Cumberland County Council, resigned from the Advisory Committee in protest.

The following statistics were supplied by the Local Government Department early in 1960:—

Original Green Belt Zone	128 square miles
Area released at the request of the C.C.C. 1951-59	16 square miles
Area recommended by the C.C.C. for release, October, 1959	22 square miles
Additional area to be released as result of Minister's fixation of a permanent inner boundary	24 square miles
Pockets which do not form part of the true Green Belt and which are to be rezoned as "non-urban"	22 square miles
Residual Green Belt Zone, 1960	44 square miles

The Minister agreed that the 46 odd square miles to be released would have to be planned in considerable detail by County and local Councils before being actually opened for development. This work has occupied the past twelve months and the land should be ready for development early in 1961.

⁴ *Sydney's Great Experiment*, page 81. In the early 'fifties, attempts to develop a satellite town at Penrith-St. Mary's, in which the County Council had participated, proved a dismal failure. The Council's delay in making further "clear-cut proposals" was a matter of once bitten, twice shy.

At the end of October, 1960, the County Council had carried out detail planning in all Municipalities and Shires affected by the releases, except in Kuring-gai, Ryde and Warringah.

Land now being released from the Green Belt, excluding land in those three districts, amounts to 50 square miles. This sub-total is being rezoned as follows:—

Living Areas and Low Density	
Residential Areas	17 square miles
County Open Space	18.5 square miles
Industrial	3.75 square miles
Special Uses	1.75 square miles
Non Urban (Rural)	9 square miles

About 52,000 cottages can be built in these future Living Areas to accommodate about 200,000 people. The County Council now estimates that existing Living Areas already have a capacity for increase of 550,000 thus giving a total reserve for 750,000 people. Assuming population growth in the County to be about 40,000 per year, then a reserve now exists for the next 19 years. Nobody yet knows how much more land will be involved in the Kuring-gai, Ryde and Warringah releases, simply because none of the hard-pressed planning staffs have yet found time to measure them.

The authorities have introduced two new concepts into the detail planning of the new areas. These are (a) the idea of Development Areas, or small neighbourhoods, which although split in many ownerships must be comprehensively planned as units before any subdivision can take place and (b) the requirement that subdividers should pay for many more services than they are now called upon to pay for. These new obligations may include footpaths, grading of verges, street tree planting and tree guards, street lighting and electricity reticulation, water and sewerage reticulation. Subdividers must already pay only for road making, kerb and gutter and drainage.

This is an attempt to make everyone connected with "promiscuous urbanisation" face up to the heavy costs of their activities, costs which at the moment are piling up as long term social debt. The requirements that subdividers pay for most of these services is the rule, rather than the exception, overseas and has been long overdue in N.S.W. The present proposal, however, even if adopted, would apply only to the 50 square miles to be released from the

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Green Belt. Nevertheless it may prove to be the thin end of a larger and longer wedge.

The conflicts of the past ten years now seem to have been resolved in a compromise. The Housing Commission have Hoxton Park, Liverpool and Sutherland and Baulkham Hills Councils will reign over larger populations. Many property owners and subdividers have made their fortunes. The new Minister for Local Government has an enhanced reputation for action. And last but not least, the County Council has saved a great deal of land from premature subdivision over the past decade and has probably saved the community millions of pounds in future expenditures by clinging so doggedly to the principles of the Green Belt idea, and fighting over each square mile before giving it up.

The County Council has made a surprisingly quick and effective recovery from the seeming knock-out blow of Christmas, 1959. It looks as if, in the end, only 17 or 20 square miles of new Living Area Zone will come from the 50 or 60 square miles release. Furthermore, and more importantly, this land might become the most sensibly planned in detail, and sensibly financed, development in the County.

But although the old conflicts now seem to have been revolved, the seeds of new ones have already been planted. The next twenty years will see a battle between the "satellite" and the "finger" patterns of metropolitan expansion. That, however, is another story. I can only hope that by writing what I have about the Green Belt controversy so far, I have provided students of political science with some food for thought on metropolitan policy-making and administration.

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