

Community Engagement and Community Representation in a Pressure Cooker

Tim Nicholls*

For the past two decades, the rate of interstate migration to Queensland has been the prime driving force behind the south east Queensland economy.

It has driven growth in housing, retail and small business. Its influence is apparent across all commercial and industrial sectors — even tourism in Queensland is driven in part by the ongoing dynamic of interstate migration.

So we all know that this strong growth in population is part of the character of the south east corner. It creates positives but also some challenges that have to be addressed.

In June this year, the magazine *BRW* carried an article about these opportunities and challenges. It said:

The population of the south-east of the state is expected to **increase by 10.5 per cent between 2006 and 2011**, the Queensland government says.

This level of growth will present substantial challenges to the state's planning system and the state government's ability to keep housing affordable.

'This level of growth equates to just over 55,000 new residents each year or demand for about 5000 new dwellings every month,' RP Data research director Tim Lawless says.

That's *BRW* from its June edition in 2008.

But as I have said, this wave of change is not something new breaking over us for the first time. For at least twenty years, these opportunities and challenges have framed the bulk of our responsibilities as politicians in this fortunate part of Australia.

* Tim Nicholls, MP, member for Clayfield, Queensland Legislative Assembly, Shadow Treasurer, Shadow Minister for Future Growth.

Let's go back 12 years — to a report on population by the then Department of Local Government and Planning as reported by the *Courier Mail* in October 1996, Local Government Minister Di McCauley, whose department prepared the report, said the population projections had major social and economic consequences for Queensland and governments needed to start planning now.

The Gold Coast will record the highest growth rate of any local government area in Queensland, attracting an extra 187,650 people to reach 518,190 by 2011.

The south-east region, from the Gold Coast to Noosa and west to Gatton, will double to reach 3.9 million by 2031.

Brisbane is expected to grow by nearly one million people to reach more than 2.44 million by 2031 — a 64 per cent increase.

Wide Bay-Burnett is expected to record the third-highest growth rate in the state, growing from 222,520 to 427,720 by 2031.

A flow of up to 1500 people a week for twenty years is a big demographic change but it is also a powerful political movement. Because of these forces, Queensland is a pressure cooker of political imperatives.

Over twenty years, this strong current has had an impact on every part of politics in Queensland. At every level of government and in every part of the south east questions such as the availability and affordability of housing, the provision of roads and public transport, the capacity of our hospitals and schools, the burden on families of rates and taxes, these things have to be managed politically. It is not an easy task and the consequences of political mismanagement are severe.

So let's zoom in to the area I represent — the electorate of Clayfield, which is situated between the north of Brisbane City and Brisbane airport. The electorate is in the front line of pressure on infrastructure with the massive growth of the now privatised Brisbane Airport, served by the overloaded Gateway Motorway and the east-west arterial from Sandgate which draws airport traffic through Clayfield.

Only this week, we had the operators of the airport calling on the families and friends of travellers to say their goodbyes at home, so as to reduce the numbers of people trekking to and from the airport on this overloaded road network.

In the middle of this is the plan to address the road traffic needs of the network through the construction of the much-needed airport link tunnel.

This tunnel has been advocated by the Liberal Lord Mayor of Brisbane, supported strongly by me in my previous role as a local councillor and council transport committee chairman.

The contract for the airport link and tunnel was announced recently.

I quote from the online newspaper — the *Brisbane Times* this week:

The biggest transport project in Australia will go underground to fast-track traffic to Brisbane Airport and avoid congestion in the city's northern suburbs.

Two new underground busway stations will be built on Lutwyche Road, while the \$3.4 billion Airport Link road — carrying a toll of about \$4.80 when it opens in 2012, but cutting travel time from Bowen Hills to the airport to just six minutes - will also tunnel underground.

The State Government this morning accepted the bid from a consortium including Macquarie Capital Group, Thiess and John Holland — known as BrisConnections — to build Australia's largest public private partnership (PPP).

The largest road and tunnel project in Australia, it includes a 6.7km tunnel running 40 to 50 metres underground from Bowen Hills to the airport roundabout.

Originally, plans for the road contained a mixture of ground-level roads and tunnels. However, under the proposal accepted by the State Government today, almost the entire Airport Link project is underground.

The tunnel will link from Bowen Hills to Brisbane Airport roundabout and avoid 16 sets of traffic lights, slashing travel times.

This is one of three projects the winning team will build, for a total cost of \$4.8 billion.

In the other two projects, the disastrous roundabout at Airport Drive will be completely transfigured, with a new four-lane flyover running 750 metres from the East West Arterial Road at Toombul over the Gateway Motorway to connect with the existing Airport Drive by 2011–2012.

So, we have an essential project in an area badly affected by the consequences of our rapid and sustained population growth.

On the merits, you'd hope that such a project would enjoy strong community support. You'd hope that in the interests of addressing the massive burden caused by our rapid population growth and the consequent burden on road and public transport infrastructure, such a project would have broad bipartisan support.

But that would be a bit naive.

So I want to relay to you my experiences of participating in the process that has led to agreement on a start on this important project.

It is all about community engagement, consultation, politics and political leadership in an environment where the political pressures have been building for decades.

It is about building a consensus among local groups and in the wider community to satisfy and balance local needs against the wider community imperative.

We need airport link, but in building it, we needed to satisfy the affected community that their interests were not going to be completely bypassed or ignored.

As the Brisbane Times noted, the completed design of the Airport Link has it located underground near Kedron State High School. A temporary indoor sports hall will be built at the school to compensate for temporary damage to its oval.

Kedron High and Wooloowin State School will be air-conditioned and Wooloowin State School will get a new pick-up and drop-off zone to help them recover after the extensive work on Lutwyche Road.

Major changes have been agreed along the Kedron Brook intersection (Lutwyche and Gympie roads) with a new network of underground roads and bridges, including cycleways and an additional 35 properties have been earmarked for resumption.

This successful process is what you might call 'political engagement in a pressure cooker.'

So my appeal to my colleagues today comes on behalf of all residents of south east Queensland. The need for infrastructure in our region is chronic. A tendency for the political process to lag too far behind the needs of our rapidly growing population only means that when the political will is finally found, it comes with greater cost, pain and complexity.

After years of lagging, at last the process is becoming more responsive.

In this regard, I would naturally point to the political commitment and courage displayed by my friend Campbell Newman, who has been an advocate of infrastructure over populism for many years now. If you go back to 2003 when he was contesting the Brisbane Lord Mayoralty for the first time, he copped a lot of criticism for the size and strength of the vision he presented.

Here is a quote from the Courier Mail covering the 2003 campaign. At that time, it said both parties agreed on the \$1Bn North-South Bypass tunnel, with Labor proposing more busways, buslanes and transit lanes. Lachlan Heywood wrote,

The Liberals, on the other hand, have proposed a string of tunnels which form a triangular network called TransApex around inner Brisbane.

This involves tunnels linking Milton Rd at Mt Coot-tha to Hale St at Paddington, Old Cleveland Rd to the Western Freeway at Toowong, and Hale St at Paddington to Merivale and Cordelia streets in South Brisbane.

Question marks remain over Newman's ability to deliver on these tunnels, given the difficulty involved in getting just one tunnel up, but the lord mayoral hopeful has promised to deliver a financial model in the new year.

Looking back on those times, I doubt anyone in the room would now argue that Campbell's Trans-apex scheme was anything other than a timely recognition of the size of the problem we confront.

The State Government itself spent years ridiculing proposals for a waste-water recycling project to boost our local water supply infrastructure before drought and the collapse of our existing storage levels forced a sudden conversion on the road to Damascus just two years ago.

The fact is that more, not less work will be required in the provision of infrastructure — road infrastructure, water infrastructure and public transport infrastructure — particularly in the south east corner. More not less work will need to be done to boost services — health, education, police and legal support and the facilities they need to cater for our inbuilt rates of population growth.

As a community advocate, I urge my colleagues not to be afraid of criticism if the consequence is that good and necessary works remain undone.

In every case there is a large silent majority. In south east Queensland, it is a silent majority growing in size with every passing day. ▲