

# Divided Cities, Divided Country

The inequalities between people according to where they live are well known in Australia. Very wealthy households congregate in areas like Sydney's Mosman and Vaucluse, Melbourne's Toorak, North Adelaide and Perth's Peppermint Grove and Dalkeith. Poorer households inhabit whatever places they can afford with their lower incomes, commonly towards the urban outskirts where land and houses are cheaper but transport more difficult and local services more meagre.

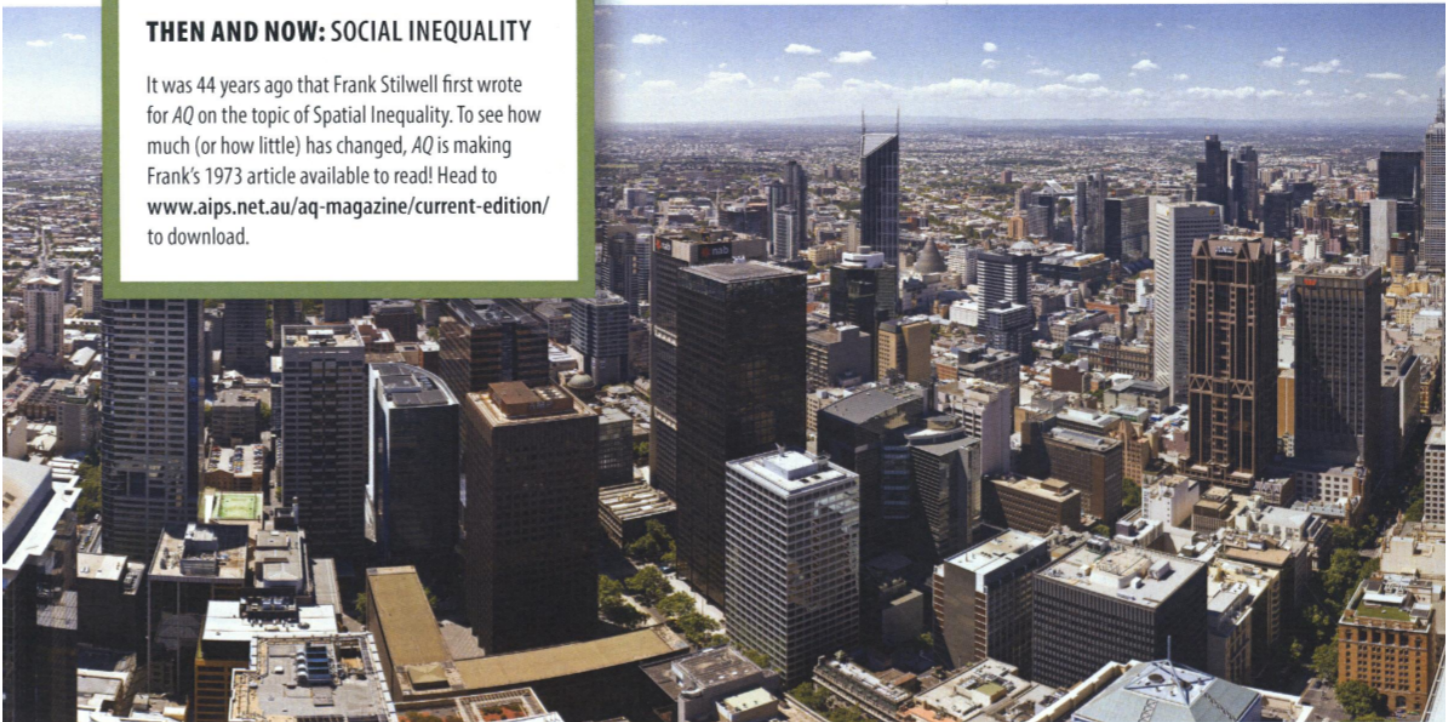
ARTICLE BY: **PROFESSOR FRANK STILWELL**

**A**longside those well-established urban inequalities are the equally long-standing divisions between 'the city' and 'the bush' (the latter, of course, having its own huge contrasts between country towns, rural areas, remote and very remote regions).

In practice the socioeconomic pattern is a complex mosaic rather than a clear spatial dualism. Yet it is equally the case that economic and social inequalities are structural and deeply etched into the Australian socio-economic landscape.

## THEN AND NOW: SOCIAL INEQUALITY

It was 44 years ago that Frank Stilwell first wrote for *AQ* on the topic of Spatial Inequality. To see how much (or how little) has changed, *AQ* is making Frank's 1973 article available to read! Head to [www.aips.net.au/aq-magazine/current-edition/](http://www.aips.net.au/aq-magazine/current-edition/) to download.





As the radical urban geographer David Harvey has argued, the rich command space while the poor are trapped in it.

Does it matter? Some say not, arguing that geographical or spatial inequalities are simply the result of personal choices. From this perspective, the spatial inequalities we observe are simply the outcome of where people are born and where they choose to live, taking account of job opportunities, housing costs and transport facilities. Within the capital cities in particular, housing prices act as a very severe sorting mechanism, as median prices in Sydney and Melbourne climb over a million dollars.

It may be conceded that geographical inertia is a big factor too: people commonly stay in the locality of their origin, to be near to family and friends, even though the local economic

opportunities may be poor. Seen from a conservative perspective, markets for land, labour and capital facilitate the most efficient geographical outcome, allowing people to locate where they choose and where they can afford, given the prevailing distribution of income and wealth.

A more critical political economic viewpoint draws our attention to the systemic factors that reproduce and amplify the spatial inequalities. This brings people's different class positions, occupations and incomes into the spotlight. More than that, it draws attention to the vicious cycles that commonly intensify inequalities once they take a spatial form.

In the academic literature these are what are known as 'processes of circular



and cumulative causation'.<sup>1</sup> They cause spatial inequalities, both within the major metropolitan areas and between city and country, to compound the inequalities that originate from people's different socioeconomic positions. They also inhibit remedial redistributive policies, because the wealthiest people, with the strongest vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*, also have the strongest influence over political processes. As the radical urban geographer David Harvey has argued, the rich command space while the poor are trapped in it.<sup>2</sup>





Cities are both physical and psychological devices for quietly shifting resources from poorer to richer and for excusing or concealing – with a baffled but complacent air –  
**the increasing deprivation of the poor.**

A careful consideration of the spatial dimension of inequality is therefore necessary if we are to sort out what is at stake and what might be done to produce more equitable outcomes. This spatial dimension to the analysis is an adjunct to other studies of the distribution of income, wealth and economic opportunities, such as those appearing in this issue of *Australian Quarterly*.

### Spatial Inequalities: *Plus ça Change...*

Engaging with this topic is a veritable 'walk down memory lane' for me. It is 44 years since I wrote my first article about Australian urban inequalities in this journal, co-authored with my research assistant Jill Hardwick and published under the title 'Social Inequality in Australian Cities'.<sup>1</sup>

A few years earlier I had completed my PhD on regional economic issues at a British university.

Arriving in Australia in 1970, I was interested to see how the uneven affluence in the renowned 'lucky country' showed up in distinctive patterns of urban and regional economic inequality. I was also impressed by the thoughtful writing on the topic by the Adelaide-based historian and social scientist, Hugh Stretton.

In his book 'Ideas for Australian Cities', Stretton wrote that 'very big cities are both physical and psychological devices for quietly shifting resources from poorer to richer and for excusing or concealing – with a baffled but complacent air – the increasing deprivation of the poor'.<sup>2</sup>

There were growing political rumblings about urban inequalities in the early

IMAGE: © Sardaka-Wiki

1970s too. Shortly before becoming Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam stated his view that the nation's socioeconomic inequalities were fundamentally spatial and would need to be tackled by explicitly spatial policies.

After gaining office, his government developed a new Department of Urban and Regional Development for this purpose. Policies included Land Commissions mandated to keep the price of housing down, improved infrastructure in poorer suburbs, innovative public housing projects and a national urban and regional strategy including the planned development of new towns.<sup>3</sup>

The government was ousted after only three years, following the controversial 'constitutional coup' of 1975, so the long-term effects were modest. But, in terms of Federal involvement with urban and regional policy, we have not seen anything quite like it since.

So I 'happily' return to the topic 44 years later to reflect on what has happened in the meanwhile. A lot, of course. However, nothing that has fundamentally transformed the spatial inequalities. Looking back at the patterns revealed in my 1973 *Australian Quarterly* article, it is strikingly evident that the inequalities have pretty much the same patterns. The famous French saying that 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' has strong resonance.

Our cities have become ever bigger and more territorially specialised. The imbalance between city and the bush has



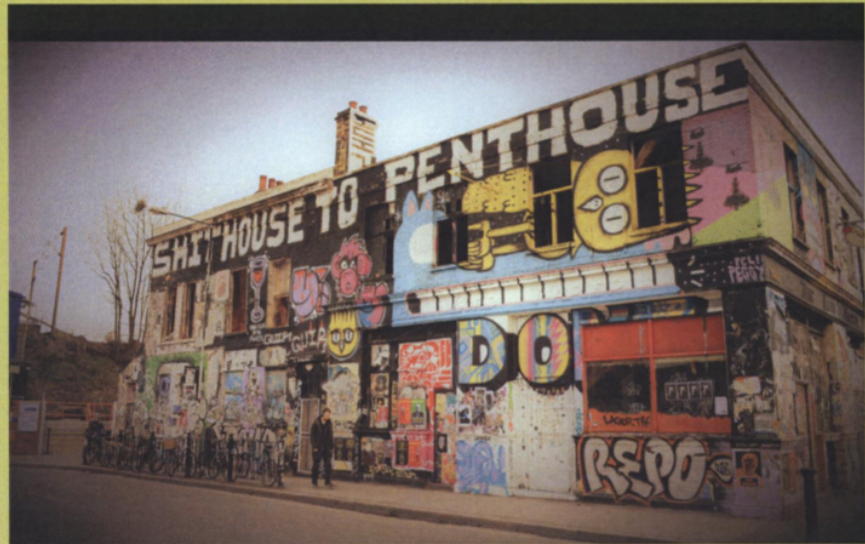


become greater too. And, notwithstanding some trumpet blasts of political rhetoric, no systematic policy comparable to the Whitlam government's has ever been attempted.

There has been a continuing tradition of talking about decentralisation from the big cities, of course. My use of the word 'talking' is significant here. The very fact that Australian electorates are geographically defined ensures that there will always be politicians drawing attention to the need for redistribution of opportunities between different localities.

Speeches by parliamentarians from electorates in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne often begin with claims about getting a better deal for the 'battlers' they represent. Historically, getting a better deal for 'the bush' has been an even more recurrent theme: many have been the parliamentary speeches beginning with "I'm a country member...".

Effective action has been much less forthcoming. The dominant feature has been political 'pork-barrelling', especially in marginal electorates, as politicians seek to hang on to their seats by getting public funds for building new swimming pools, sports stadia and the like. Deputy



Prime Minister, Barnaby Joyce, has been doing something similar though his push to relocate the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) from Canberra to Armidale, which is in his own electorate.

This sort of piecemeal action falls far short of anything that could be called a comprehensive approach to decentralisation. The redirection of investment and job opportunities away from the existing metropolitan areas is no easy matter, of course. It would take cross-party agreement

and a commitment to a 20 year plan, at least. Lacking that, the prophetic words of Max Neutze, Australia's premier urban economist, describing decentralisation as

'everyone's policy but nobody's program' continue to resonate.

The economic landscape is changing anyhow. The mining boom has seen huge tracts of land cut open for mineral extraction, creating major environmental stresses but little additional regional employment. The growing imbalance between the city and country, in terms of economic opportunity, continues apace.

Within cities, many industrial activities have been relocated to the outer suburbs, more commonly drawn by cheap land rather than government. Land values in inner areas have risen to levels comparable with the world's most expensive cities.

Some of the drivers of these processes of spatial change are local: others are global. In Sydney, for example, we have seen the development of a 'global city arc', comprising a boomerang-shaped area from North Ryde and French's Forest, to Chatswood and North Sydney, through the CBD and inner eastern suburbs and on to the airport at Mascot.

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IMAGE: © Matt Brown-Flickr





The 'high-end' activities concentrated in this belt contrast with the more locally-focused economic activities of other parts of the city and its adjacent regions. Thus, the uneven effects of globalisation, facilitated by neoliberal policies, flow through into spatial changes featuring winners and losers. As the cities have become more territorially specialised, the spatial inequalities have become more entrenched.

### Causes of spatial inequalities

It is not difficult to see how the spatial inequalities reflect broad political economic trends. The share of national income going to the owners of capital has increased steadily over the last two decades. This benefits those with surplus capital that they can use for investment, whether in real estate, shares or other financial assets. Meanwhile, people dependent only on wage incomes are doing it tougher: wages growth has now dropped almost to zero.

The effects of this asymmetry are evident in urban housing markets, where young wage-earners wanting to buy their first home try (usually unsuccessfully) to compete with investors buying perhaps their tenth or twentieth property. The asymmetry is also evident in the increasingly concentrated ownership of accumulated wealth. According to a recent Evatt Foundation report, the wealthiest 10 percent of Australian households, on a conservative estimate, hold at least half of the total wealth. This makes the country mid-ranking among OECD nations, thereby refuting the popular belief that Australia is somehow exceptional because of its egalitarianism. The degree of wealth inequality is growing, with a particularly marked rise in the share of the top 1 percent of households.<sup>7</sup>

What are the sorting mechanisms that 'translate' these political economic inequalities into geographical patterns? Housing prices most obviously. The ratio of average

house prices to average annual wage income has risen from around 3 to over 10 in the big cities during the last 40 years.

Inevitably, this drives greater concentrations of rich and poor households in different localities. But the location of jobs, transport facilities and educational institutions in different areas is also important. Here too a metropolitan bias is evident and, within the cities, a spatial bias towards the capital-favoured areas such as Sydney's 'global city arc'. The overall effect is greater spatial segregation of different income groups that limits social mobility and thereby has a 'lock-in' effect on class-based inequalities.

### Consequences of spatial inequality

The adverse social consequences of extreme economic inequality are being increasingly widely recognised. UK epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett, have made a substantial contribution by carefully documenting the correlations between inequality and an array of health and social problems across a wide range of countries.<sup>8</sup>

Their international comparative studies have highlighted positive correlations between income inequalities and indicators of physical illness, mental illness, obesity, violence, rates of prison incarceration, teenage pregnancies and low educational attainment. In general, the more unequal societies have the more intense social problems.

IMAGE © Tim Kopra-Twitter



## 10 percent of Australian households hold at least half of the total wealth...refuting the popular belief that Australia is somehow exceptional because of its egalitarianism.

IMAGE © Xavier Bonnefoy-Cudraz-Flickr

Focusing particularly on health problems, a study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has put some numerical values on the spatial inequalities.<sup>9</sup> It shows that, for the period 2009-2011, people living in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) areas had an average mortality rate 30 percent higher than people living in areas with the highest SES.

Those people living in remote and very remote areas had an average mortality rate 40 percent above people in the major cities – this particular inequality having a strong correlation with the higher proportion of Aboriginal people living in the remote and very remote regions.

Putting absolute numbers on the health outcomes, the same study found that if Australians living in rural and remote areas had the same death rates as those living in the cities, there would have been 825 fewer deaths from prostate cancer over the two year study period. This is just one example among many, showing the significant implications for public health arising from spatial socioeconomic inequalities.

Other relevant recent research has been undertaken jointly by psychologists from universities in Denmark, Norway, the USA

and New Zealand, published this year in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science.<sup>10</sup> Their study of 45,000 people across 27 countries found a significant connection between inequality and beliefs that influence social behaviour, usually for the worse.

As the authors wrote: 'societal inequality is reflected in people's minds as dominance motives that underpin ideologies and actions that ultimately

sustain group-based hierarchy'. In other words, inequality becomes accepted as a social norm that justifies the behaviour of those at the top at the expense of those with inferior status. The result,

to quote the authors again, is; 'greater racism, sexism, welfare opposition, and even willingness to enforce group hegemony violently by participating in ethnic persecution of subordinate out-groups'. Not a pretty prospect, indeed.

So what are the overall implications for our wellbeing? The growing field of 'happiness research' has also been generating considerable evidence showing that the more equal societies

tend to have more contented people. The substantial increase in GDP in many countries during the last half-century has not been accompanied by notable increases in self-reported levels of happiness. There is a more strongly positive cross-country correlation between happiness and greater economic equality.<sup>11</sup>

It seems that mainstream economists, and the politicians that have taken their advice to prioritise economic growth rather than equitable redistribution, have been backing the wrong horse. Or, rather, they've been backing the horse favoured by the already wealthy, not pursuing the interests of the society as a whole.

### Policy responses to spatial inequality

What could be done to transform the situation if there were the political will so to do? A mixture of spatial and non-spatial policies would be required. The primary driver would need to be an integrated set of policies to reverse, or at least put a brake on, the growing concentration of incomes and wealth. Removing the existing discount on capital gains taxation and the tax advantages arising from negative gearing which mainly benefit the relatively wealthy, are obvious Australian cases in point. So too would be the re-introduction of inheritance taxation. Any measure that reduced inequality in the overall distribution of income and wealth would tend, other things being equal, to reduce spatial inequalities too.

In general, the more unequal societies have the more intense social problems.





## Science policy, in the broadest sense, will be necessary and useful in developing more liveable, equitable and sustainable cities and regions

There are some directly spatial policies that could be effective too. Regional decentralisation policies could be systematically implemented if governments of all major parties shared the commitment. Rather than continuing to build on the pre-federation colonial foundations of our settlement pattern, we could simultaneously 'take the heat off' the big cities and give a boost to non-metropolitan regions.

A newly constructed very fast train line between Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane could be a focus for planned new cities at intermediate stations, so long as the resulting land value increases were captured as public revenue rather than privately appropriated. The construction phases alone would create a tremendous boost to investment and employment in the selected regional localities. Beyond that, the development of other infrastructure and services could help to give a stronger economic base to those decentralised developments.

Provision of public housing in these newly developed towns need not, and should not, be limited in its provision to people with complex social needs, as public housing policies now tend to be: rather, public housing could be an important element in attracting working people to the new growth centres. The decentralised developments could also be planned and built on the basis of best-practice environmental principles.

Within the metropolitan areas there are also policies that could help – for example, by moderating the inflation in

housing prices and rents. Spatial policies alone are unlikely to provide a comprehensive solution to such problems without comparable attention to more general egalitarian reforms. The connection is obvious enough, isn't it? If people's incomes were more equal, then land and housing prices would be less important as determinants of where people can afford to live.

Recognising this brings broader considerations of housing policy and taxation policy sharply into focus. Removing the discount on capital gains tax and the tax concessions associated with negative gearing would be important first steps. These current tax arrangements mostly benefit the relatively affluent. And it is the existence of tax loopholes like these that shapes how the housing market now operates as a spatial redistributive mechanism. It's time to change...


### Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will

What are the prospects of a combination of these across-the-board and spatial reforms coming to fruition? Probably rather poor, I suspect, in the light of the experience of the last half-century. Indeed, it seems likely that people talking about this topic in another fifty years will be saying much the same things, but in a

situation of much deeper environmental stresses and socioeconomic divisions.

Dialectical processes are at work, however: things don't get markedly worse without some sort of backlash, for better or worse. And, if there is any role for knowledge as a driver of enlightened public policy, this also gives some modest basis for hope. As noted in this article, social science research supporting the pursuit of egalitarian policies is becoming ever stronger. Science policy, in the broadest sense, will be necessary and useful in developing more liveable, equitable and sustainable cities and regions. In this context it is notable indeed that the CSIRO has a long-standing interest and engagement in spatial issues, which deserves to be widely known and encouraged.<sup>12</sup>

An optimistic view is that Australia could be at the front of the pack, acting as an exemplar to other nations wrestling with the stresses of even more extreme inequalities. But that would require turning away from the neoliberal ideologies and practices that have led to the false confidence in market-based economic processes.

Then we may indeed achieve something closer to the Australian dream of an equitable society that does not lock people into vicious cycles of disadvantage while others enjoy the cumulative benefits of privilege. 



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