

# Melbourne's riding high

Robin Hambleton draws lessons from his recent visit 'down under'

The debate about how to create 'sustainable communities' is an international one. Australian local government has contributed not just to the debate but, more importantly, to innovative practice.

Last month, I was invited to speak at a conference on the future of Australian local government in Melbourne. Organised by the Municipal Association of Victoria, it was a terrific conference, with 300 councillors and officers working up a new vision for local governance.

I took the opportunity to connect with colleagues in city hall, and here I offer three insights on the 'sustainable communities' debate drawn from my Melbourne experience.

First, a lesson in creative community protest. On my way to meet the deputy lord mayor and chief executive in Melbourne Town Hall, I encountered 500 horse riders in Swanston Street.

Think Clint Eastwood – wearing their wide-rimmed cowboy hats and long, brown, Drizabone coats – these high country cattlemen and ladies could have ridden straight off the *A Fistfull of Dollars* film set.

They were an impressive sight and, in an imaginative way, they were protesting at the Steve Brack Government's decision to ban grazing in the Victorian Alpine National Park.

They waved signs which read 'Melbourne can't run country Victoria', and 'Farmers won't be looked after until the cities starve!'

The demonstration was effective. The centre of the city was brought to a standstill and the cattlemen won many friends because of their distinctive approach and good humour.

The newspaper editors lapped it up, and the story was front page news the next day, with big pictures of horsemen swarming down the streets towards parliament and headlines such as 'Wrath of the bush rides into town'.

The issues raised are contentious. Conservationists argue – and the Victoria State Government agrees with them – that cattle cause considerable damage to the national park, and that the ban on grazing is wise.

The horse riders raise important challenges for political leaders. The dress codes may be different, but similar tensions between rural and urban priorities also arise in the UK.

Turning to city planning and urban management, allows me to praise the inventiveness of politicians and officials in the City of Melbourne who have made major steps forward in relation to sustainable urban development over the last 20 years or so.

It is no surprise that *The Economist* magazine voted Melbourne the most livable city in the world last year. Why? Because the city has taken bold steps to expand the public realm, and it really has achieved significant improvements in the quality of urban life.

One example – the improvement of public space in the central area – will illustrate the argument, and could prompt innovation in UK city planning departments.

In 1994, the city conducted and published a survey of *Public spaces and public life in Melbourne*. This first-class study – dubbed *Places and people* – incorporated thoughtful analysis of existing public spaces and made a number of recommendations relating to, for example:

- improving the pedestrian network
- making gathering places of excellent quality
- strengthening street activity by altering the design of street space
- encouraging more people to use the city.

Ten years on, the city council has revisited the 1994 study and has just published a new *Places and people* report. This examines the progress made and sets out even more ambitious targets for



Cattlemen protest through the streets of Melbourne, Australia, at the Government's decision to ban cattle grazing in the Alpine National Parks

the next 10 years. And the documented results are impressive. In 1994, the central area had 95 outdoor cafés with 356 seats. Now, it has 1,940 cafés with 5,380 seats. In 1994, there were 300 metres of accessible lanes and arcades. Now there are 3.4 kilometres. In 1992, there were 736 residential apartments in the central area. Now there are 9,721.

These improvements did not come about by accident – they resulted from detailed, hard work by city planners, urban designers and assorted stakeholders.

But, and this is the most important point, the numbers tell only a fraction of the story.

It is the quality of the urban spaces, the inventive new architecture, the sensitive urban design, the sophisticated finishing, the dynamic atmosphere, the innovative public art... the whole feel of the place... these are the things which really matter if you want to create a sustainable community.

Here, then, is a major challenge for the Audit Commission and, indeed, for ministers. Numbers, even staggeringly impressive numbers, don't tell you that much about what you really want to know – about the actual quality of local achievement.

Much of what matters in local leadership is – and always has been – totally subjective. Melbourne gets it, and we in the UK need to get it too.

On top of this progress with the central area, Melbourne City Council is also raising the world benchmark for architecture by setting a new standard in green building design. Think 'town hall extension' and the image conjured up is unlikely to be architecturally inspiring.

Go to Melbourne and think again. The Council House 2 build-

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ing – known in the game as the CH2 building – now under construction adjacent to Melbourne Town Hall – is a visionary new building aiming to change the way Australia approaches ecologically sustainable design. Rather than build a conventional 10-storey office tower for 540 Melbourne City staff, the council decided to create an innovative, technologically advanced, environmentally-sustainable and financially-responsible building.

Due for completion in March 2006, the CH2 building at 218-242 Little Collins Street is intended, when compared with the existing Town Hall, to reduce electricity consumption by 85%, reduce gas consumption by 87%, and reduce water consumption by 72%.

The building applies well-established 'green principles'. But it also includes imaginative urban design with new shops and cafés actually in the building, as well as new pedestrian connections.

Too many cities in Britain are going in the wrong direction – they permit 'could be anywhere' buildings, 'gated' housing projects that privatise the public realm, shopping centres which are locked up at night, and promote single-use rather than multiple-use areas.

There is good practice in the UK, but not many cities can stand shoulder to shoulder with Melbourne. ▀

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For more information on urban design in Melbourne visit: [www.melbourne.vic.gov.au](http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au) and [www.fedsq.com](http://www.fedsq.com)