

Mark Knight



Labor will destroy a city that doesn't need saving

This week, the Victorian government passed new laws to transform much of Melbourne's suburbs into high and medium-rise precincts and abolish or severely curtail council and resident participation in the planning process.

The Labor government, Greens and some members of the crossbench teamed up to reject a Liberal Party attempt to disallow three major planning amendments that impose the most radical changes made to the Victorian planning system.

In siding with Labor, the Greens condemned the urban environments valued by millions of people as valueless, changing fundamentally the ways people will live.

They also abandoned democratic principles by supporting Labor's autocratic exclusion of citizens and local government from decisions about the future of their city.

Much of Melbourne's middle ring and established suburbs will be demolished and rebuilt initially around 60 rail stations and shopping centres to a radius of about 1km. Up to 50 per cent of some municipalities will be reconstructed.

Developments of up to three stories will need no permit and commercial uses will be introduced into many residential areas.

A parliamentary select committee investigated three of 13 planning amendments that now comprise a

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new planning system. The government devised this system in secret with the property industry and imposed it without proper consultation or public exhibition.

A direct pathway now leads from developers to ministerial planning approvals. Traditional rights of objection and appeal are removed or severely curtailed. Councils and residents are largely excluded from the planning process. The decision to approve the amendments ignored a select committee finding they posed a serious risk to heritage values and the city's "magnificent heritage buildings and zones" should be protected.

Much of the heritage legacy that makes Melbourne and regional centres distinctive and productive will be progressively obliterated.

The government's own standing committee on activity centres advised that the amendments be changed to protect heritage. The government hid this advice for six months.

Melbourne finally has been handed over to property and powerful interests by turning a planning system designed to regulate into one designed to approve. Many connections exist between the

government and property industry. In a major break with tradition, Colleen Peterson, the former head of consulting firm Ratio, was recently appointed head of state planning.

Ratio praised Ms Peterson for successfully representing property and development. She appeared at the select committee supporting the type of planning measures property industry leaders advocate.

Another connection is the use of consultants linked to the property industry to redesign the planning system. Mark Sheppard, a senior member of Urbis consulting, co-authored the key report that formed a basis of the government's activity centre redevelopment plans and controls, and with Urbis helped prepare the structure plans for the Suburban Rail Loop precincts.

He and Urbis then supported the government's proposals for activity centres in presentations to the select committee. Mr Sheppard represented the Victorian Planning and Environmental Law Association, which has strong connections with the property industry. Among the sponsors of VPELA gala dinners, for example, are Ratio, Urbis and Villawood Properties.

Labor and the Greens also ignored the findings of the select committee and the Greens minority report that the government had no evidence its plan would increase the supply of housing or affordable housing.

Labor had proceeded without modelling the effects. It ignored evidence the planning system did not limit new housing and that increasing the supply of market-rate housing did not significantly improve affordability.

It accepted that tens of thousands of council planning approvals remain unacted upon because of high building costs. But ignored findings that construction industry problems, not the planning system, local councils or residents, are limiting new dwelling supply. The government imposed its amendments without any idea of their impacts on land supply, land price or broader impacts, driven not by evidence but blind ideology.

The question asked of the parliament was a simple one: why destroy a city unnecessarily to save it?

Why not achieve housing targets that can be met in better ways while retaining Melbourne's valued amenity and historic assets?

There is time to plan for growth while protecting what we most value.

The select committee recommended the planning amendments be modified upon consultation with councils and communities. This used to be called "proper planning". The government has replaced it, supported by the Greens, with a new authoritarianism.

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Jacinta's tax will bleed us

Andrew Rule



While the rest of us were sitting down to Christmas dinner, a small army of volunteers was on the fireground, waiting in 38-degree heat rather than risking the fire getting away.

When the hot wind came, it nearly did. All that stopped it burning from the Grampians to the coast were the volunteers who spent all week fighting it. Double shifts of danger, smoke and heat.

There were 19 CFA trucks and up to 400 private tankers that look after a huge part of western Victoria currently gripped by the worst drought since 1967.

All volunteers. Nearly all farmers. Every summer they save thousands of farm animals and native wildlife and millions of dollars in property: Fences, fodder, sheds, houses.

And they save lives, of course. Remember, 75 died on Ash Wednesday and 173 on Black Saturday, when the fires did get away. The cost of wildfire is destruction and death. Ask anyone in California. Yet it's the same volunteers who confront wildfires who are being burnt by the state government's "emergency services levy", slippery words for a brutally unfair tax.

This unpaid army of the willing doesn't want reward.

They want fairness. They're angry and bewildered by the savage tax that's almost trebling the "fire levy" already grafted onto annual council rates.

Sure, the residential levy is rising too, from 8.7 cents to 17.3 cents per \$1000 property valuation. But rural landholders' already steep levy is going up from 28.7 cents to 83 cents – that's 189 per cent.

A farmer near Seymour says his \$15,000 levy is much higher than it was the year before – but will jump to \$28,000. A landholder near Willaura who spent all Christmas fighting the Grampians fire? His levy goes from \$25,000 to \$70,000 plus. The cost of a Toyota 4WD. Every year. These people, having volunteered time and equipment to fight fires, are now bleeding thousands of dollars a week to feed starving livestock. They are stoic people, not whingers. But they have good reason to drive firetrucks to parliament to protest against a tax that threatens not just to break farmers but entire shires and struggling country towns.

The state is forcing councils to collect the tax but they can't get blood from a stone. The blood will be that of animals being shot as the drought drags on.

Then from the suicides.
Andrew Rule is a Herald Sun columnist