

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. W. McMAHON, C.H., M.P.
Prime Minister

ON

National Urban and Regional Development Authority Bill 1972

Second Reading

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 11 October 1972]

Mr McMAHON (Lowe—Prime Minister) (11.40)—I move:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

On 19th September, I made a statement to the House announcing that the Government proposed to take new initiatives to work with the States towards urban and regional development objectives. I said that the Government had decided that it will take immediate steps financially and in other ways in a co-ordinated programme with the State Governments. The introduction of this Bill fulfils the commitment I then gave to introduce interim legislation into Parliament this session. Although the legislation is interim, the new authority set up by the bill will nevertheless be required to operate with vigour and in accord with its charter from the outset. In a vast country which is developing as rapidly as Australia, it is most important that the Government take responsible action which will influence the distribution of population and economic activity to the economic and social advantage of the nation.

The stresses and strains of growth are having an impact on the living conditions and the environment of the entire Australian

community. These pressures which are being felt in many countries, present issues of national moment warranting co-operative action between the Commonwealth and the States. We have the experience of the United Kingdom, France and Canada amongst others to draw on. The Government believes that unless we embark on a vigorous, imaginative and responsible programme of urban and regional development, in partnership with the States, our efforts to secure a better quality of life for the Australian community through a wide variety of existing programmes will be compromised. The consequences of the imbalance caused by the concentration of population and employment around the principal Australian cities with the resulting problems of congestion and pollution are such that action must now be taken. The trend to increasing concentration is already evident to a degree which is causing concern. If no action is taken, the problem will become more acute as our population grows from 13 million to possibly 22 million over the balance of the century. The increasing concentration of population in our great cities will magnify the consequences of increasing population

growth. It is the geographical distribution of population and industry rather than total scale which calls for our attention.

We believe it is widely accepted that these are national problems requiring urgent attention, and that the Commonwealth should participate with the States in solving them. We believe too that a properly conceived and well managed programme of urban and regional development will be approved and welcomed by the community generally. It is clear that the Commonwealth and States must work together. It is also clear that there will be a need for additional expenditure and the Commonwealth stands ready to contribute its share. As, importantly, we will shape our own policies and programmes where appropriate so as to ensure that urban and regional implications are fully taken into account. The implementation of a successful national programme of urban and regional development could mark a turning point in the social and economic life of this country.

Our efforts must be successful. Therefore, they must be properly conceived. The Commonwealth/State Officials' Committee on Decentralisation which conducted its researches in the Australian context concluded that the only type of decentralisation which offers significant prospects of success is selective decentralisation. As I stated on 19th September, the Commonwealth endorses this conclusion and favours the development of a small number of carefully selected centres, having regard to factors likely to be favourable to their growth. Later on, with the benefit of more experience and the availability of more resources, it can be expected that additional centres will be selected for accelerated growth. We will want to identify and encourage the balanced growth of sub-metropolitan centres as an alternative to growth in the existing city areas.

In co-operation with the States, we will look for those sub-metropolitan centres that offer the greatest potential for rapid development. These will be centres near to but distinct from the existing major cities. It is our view that the development of regional growth centres and sub-metropolitan centres—projects capable of being defined, programmed and financed—offers the most direct and beneficial means of immediate Commonwealth involvement. As I have emphasised, however, the action to be

taken must be taken in consultation and partnership with the States. Our early discussions with the States will have as their first objective the fullest understanding of the nature of the problems to be overcome. We will be seeking to establish how best the combined resources of the Commonwealth and State Governments can be marshalled to tackle these in an economic way and in the interests of the nation as a whole.

As I have said previously, it will be necessary to guard against the cost of development of selected centres being inflated by increases in land values directly attributable to the policy initiatives of the States and the Commonwealth. This bill is the first step towards implementation of a new Commonwealth initiative. It is, however, designed to establish the National Urban and Regional Development Authority on a proper and sound basis and to enable it to commence its work immediately. The nature of any later legislation will, of course, be determined in the light of experience. Nevertheless, the name given to the Authority clearly indicates the Government's longer term interest. We are concerned with national objectives in urban and regional development and we are concerned with development itself. Ours is a practical approach and the concept of a statutory authority and of the title chosen for it reflects our practical aims.

It is proposed that the Authority be constituted by a Commissioner. I have already announced that with the passage of the legislation, the Government proposes to invite Sir John Overall to serve as the first Commissioner and to guide the new organisation in its initial establishment period. The Government is fortunate in having a person as experienced and so able as Sir John to call on until his retirement in July next year. The bill also provides for the Commissioner to be assisted by a Deputy Commissioner. The appointment of statutory office holders will be effected as soon as possible after the bill is passed. The duties of the Authority are stated in Clause 12. It will be required to investigate and report to the Prime Minister on matters relating to urban or regional development. This investigation and advice would be designed to assist the Government in making decisions having urban and regional implications. It will also

be designed to assist the Government in its consideration of the grant of financial assistance to a State in connection with urban or regional development.

Such matters as the selection of centres for the promotion of rapid growth, the particular steps by which this might be encouraged, practical arrangements for rapid development, and financial questions including the scale of Commonwealth support, are relevant to the establishment of a co-ordinated programme. Advice would be available to the Government from the Authority on the terms and conditions on which financial assistance for urban and regional development might be granted by Parliament. The bill provides for the Authority to have power to do all things that are necessary or convenient for the performance of its functions. It may undertake pilot or experimental projects, studies, including feasibility studies. It may enter into consultative engagements with professional groups and Government agencies, and provide information and advice to other authorities.

Provision is made in the Bill for the Authority to comply with any directions given by the Prime Minister with respect to matters to be investigated by the Authority. This clause will ensure, for example, that decisions reached by the Ministerial Council, consisting of the Prime Minister and the Premiers, to which I referred in my statement in this House on 19th September, are followed through in the operations of the Authority.

In addition to the normal provision for an annual report, the Authority is required to report to the Prime Minister not later than 30th June 1973 on matters relating to urban and regional development during the 5-year period thereafter. It is not the Government's intention that the Authority should produce by that time a definitive statement on a national urban and regional development strategy. The Government does, however, propose to move in an expenditure sense commencing from the financial year 1973-74. It will be the responsibility of the Authority, therefore, to advise the Government in time for its Budget considerations in 1973 of the broad direction in which Commonwealth activities in urban and regional development might be shaped over the 5-year period. This will not be a final blueprint but rather

the first statement of an active programme. The steps involved in its preparation will be discussed by the Ministerial Council. Funds will be made available during this present financial year 1972-73 for the initial operations of the Authority.

The Bill, of course, contains appropriate provisions relating to officers' rights, staff, audit and finance. The Bill establishes an advisory committee of up to 12 members including the Commissioner. The committee will be comprised of persons who, by virtue of their knowledge and experience, can assist the Authority in the performance of its duties. This is a formal committee created by the statute with membership appointed by the Prime Minister and designed to ensure the availability of a wide range of advice and response to the Authority.

At the level of governments, I have already mentioned that we propose the establishment of a ministerial council consisting of the Prime Minister and Premiers as the principal body for consultation and co-ordination in the field of urban and regional development. I have already written to the Premiers about the Commonwealth's intentions. Honourable members have already noted from my remarks that the Authority will be responsible to me as Prime Minister. This central place in the machinery of Government will add strength to the discussions between me and my State colleagues.

This Bill is amongst the most important legislation introduced into the Federal Parliament during the post-war years. It marks our recognition that there is a direct contribution that the Commonwealth Government can make in national urban and regional development for the benefit of all Australians. Commonwealth assistance for urban and regional development is not new. What is new is Commonwealth participation with the States in a co-ordinated programme of urban and regional development.

Our objectives—the objectives of the Liberal and Country Parties—will not be achieved easily or overnight. But it is important to make a start in the prevailing climate of accord about the need for new initiatives and the broad nature of them. We will pursue these objectives vigorously. I commend the Bill to the House.