Campaigning in a high growth region

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Campaigning against unsustainable development in a high growth region presents lessons for activists in other fast-growing regions.

South East Queensland (SEQ) is the region of fastest population growth in Australia - over the last year increasing by 1200 each week. Migration provided 39,200 but the region also has the highest birth rate in Australia. This speed of growth has applied now for 20 years and the region's population has increased by nearly one million over that time. Over the next 20 years the population is estimated to increase by more than another one million, to reach 3,709,000.

In 1991 the ecological footprint was 4.9 ha per capita, multiplying out to four times the size of the region. Research from Griffith University indicates that over the last 10 years the ecological footprint has increased by 30 per cent. Ecological footprint is not the only or the most reliable way of estimating impact but on a host of other measures the figures are equally grim.

In this context the current Australia-wide talk about infrastructure needs and infrastructure choices has added intensity. It is a test bed of the seriousness of the Green response. Other regions will become growth rate leaders as conditions change (Melbourne had the biggest number of interstate migrants last year) so the lessons are salutary.

In SEQ the bleeding edge of conflict over these issues has been transport. While LA-like road proposals were put on the drawing board by the State in the 1970s it was not until this growth spurt that implementation really took off.

Community groups sprang up and there were countless meetings, rallies, petitions, 'consultations' and big protests. Most of these groups achieved a regional perspective and got beyond the simple, sometimes effective, but ultimately vulnerable, 'not-in-my-backyard' approach. The community put forward ideas that accorded with international experience and were vastly in advance of those of the planners, bureaucrats and politicians. Through all of this the only political party to support them was the Queensland Greens (who formed in 1985, a couple of years in advance of these struggles).

The fight went forward over ten years and there were losses and victories. All the victories were won in an electoral context in which the Greens presence was vital. The most crucial of these events was the 1995 State election when the Greens gave preferences against the Goss Labor government in three seats affected by a freeway proposal. Goss almost lost government and had to abandon the freeway. A rail route was built instead, and that is about to be extended and duplicated because of its high use.

Goss later lost government in a by-election. The episode, along with the Tasmanian Greens and their toughness during the Accord with Labor, had the added value of killing the myth that the Greens could only ever be a preference machine for Labor.

The current moment in this saga is captured by debate over Queensland's first ever statutory regional plan. You can read the Queensland Greens' highly critical response to this plan at http://www.qld.greens.org.au/ (go to Issues/Campaigns – Planning and Development/Draft South-East Queensland Regional Plan). Suffice it to say the Plan repeats most of the errors of the past and does not promise a solution despite the new element of regulatory teeth.

Regional planning is notoriously difficult to mobilize people on. If it cannot be seen as a backyard problem then it cannot be seen at all. But again the issue is coming to a head over transport plans. The un-built roads from those drawing boards are in various stages of planning or implementation, some now appearing as tunnels.

When the earlier array of groups closed down the Greens kept at it, voicing a same transport and regional planning alternative in policies, media work, electoral and non-electoral campaigns. Now new community movements are shaping up. The Queensland Greens are devising a community action planning based campaign. The superiority of the alternative and the heat of communities wanting to protect their quality of life should generate momentum to carry the fight into the next electoral round, when some of the plans should again be able to be defeated, with the cutting edge provided by the presence of the Green electoral alternative.

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