

An interview with: Brendan Gleeson

By Idil Gaziulusoy

Brendan Gleeson is Professor of Urban Policy Studies and the director of Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute at the University of Melbourne. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, author and editor of twelve books.

Prof. Gleeson was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities.

Brendan, I'd like you to imagine that it is now 2040 and we are living in a radically low carbon and resilient Melbourne. What does it look and feel like?

Brendan Gleeson (BG): Very different. In terms of the economy and basic economic arrangements we've finally managed to decouple economic growth from environmental impact. We've also reconceived what economic growth means so that it is much less materialistic in its nature. It's much more about growth of human wellbeing and values. We have revised the kind of indicators we used to assess and track economic activity and growth and removed from those measurement criteria the things that actually undermine environmental values and wellbeing.

We live differently in cities. We have localised much of our activity including economic activity. Cities are much more self-sustaining and self-providing and much less, in some instances almost not, dependant on extensive distributive systems for their maintenance. We've learned to live within our resource limits. The built form is quite different to now although still recognisably the same cities because over that amount of time, although it seems a long way away, cities only change incrementally annually for example. So we've seen a certain amount of change but the most important one is that we've become much better at creating good places for people to live in somewhat higher density arrangements but we've dispensed with the vertical sprawl that we're allowing now. We've found ways to create sustainable resilient neighbourhoods, places for people to live that are medium density but which are



very generous in the living space that they give to people, not crammed and crowded. But having said all that we've restrained and dispensed with actually the kind of model of poorly conceived growth at the fringe.

Can you explain a little bit more how we can achieve medium density with spacious or human size living areas without allowing the sprawl to go on?

BG: Well the major thing that we've done is to shift from a weak deregulated planning system which really allows the worst of higher density and sort of market driven compaction. We have strengthened the entire planning regimes so that we are much better at regulating for what we want and against what we don't want. We've also gone beyond regulatory planning to embrace positive planning so that we've set up in most of our cities special purpose vehicles that can build and deliver high quality infill development, housing. We've done a lot more to involve and include the citizenry in participatory planning so that they not only feel they have much more say in what's happening but we also access their wisdom about how to plan differently in different places because it's not a one size fits all model.

In your vision the main aspect you talked about was an economic system which measures wealth or growth differently and we live differently, we are self-sustaining in our cities, etc. What are the changes in society that we see in 2040 when the economy is understood and experienced differently?

BG: There's a lot more economic activity directed to low and zero carbon ventures, things and producing values and goods that are consistent with the low and zero carbon economy and there's a whole story about how we got to that. For example we will have lost the car industry by then but we will have an extensive industry building, for example when we maintain manufacturing, trains and trams or public transport infrastructure, that's just one example. The other major part of it is what I sketched out in my book *Lifeboat Cities* a couple of years ago which was the transition to an economy of care so that we put a lot more human labour power and work and a larger segment of our economy is directed to providing human services, could be everything from childcare to supporting aged people, aging society. These're some of the major changes that I would see in that time.

What are the enabling factors you observe now that can help this vision to unfold?

BG: I don't see much at all at the moment. The vision that I'm giving you is a hopeful one but I have another vision. The alternative vision that I have in my mind which I've sketched out in my most recent book is that we've had a much more confliction in the urban condition, a much more difficult and conflictual transition to a much more reduced set of circumstances. Whatever virtues we've had by that time were forced on us rather than actively sought and embraced by us. I see the inevitability of dangerous climate change in that period. I can't think of that period without recognising that the cities will have been to some extent scarified by the shifting climates and disrupted. So I see a long period of disruption and costly and painful adjustment. This is certainly a concerning vision unless we do something radical and very soon, and that's not impossible, but we are locked into climate change that has the potential to cause negative feedback. An orderly transition to some new equilibrium of decarbonisation is still something very much of an aspiration. I don't particularly see anything major in the political economy or an institutional corporate effort that's taking a set direction. I do see the seeds in social movements and in research. So there's certainly resources for hope. But I can't see anything in Australia at the moment that's leading us, tracking us towards realisation of a hopeful vision. We've just removed the carbon tax and we still have a nationally and undiminished focus on environmentally hostile growth.

You talked about seeds in social movements. Can you talk a little about those seeds, what are they?

BG: The things like the transition towns movement and other myriad movements. What is emerging from the urban fabric is a series of grassroots initiatives and movements that are insisting upon a different model or exploring or making claims about the different model. Two things come from that: one is wisdom from the grassroots about how to do things differently and to some extent I do see some shifts in local government. You can talk about things like the Moreland and Yarra Energy Foundations here which have been instigated by local government and the groups that have formed to debate and discuss Plan Melbourne. One of the groups that we supported produced a series of essays in a book called Melbourne: What Next?. Although none of that sort of scale or social organisation at present that could affect major change, it is registering politically. It's encouraging to see that the new state government is recommitting itself to climate action and ambition.

What about technological as well as social innovations such as sharing economy, peer to peer economy? There's one side that is co-opted into neoliberal corporatism and there's the other side that genuinely models a different economic system and social organisation that is working differently based on certain values. Do you see them unfolding to become influential enough to give way to your hopeful vision of a low carbon resilience future?

BG: I don't think we're going to get to a low or zero carbon future without technology and without technological change. But I don't think it's going to be led by that. My own view is that technological and social innovation are part of it but, the extent of which they're still conceived and applied within the current economic model, which most of them are, diminishes their effectiveness. I think they have incremental impacts at best. To arrest the overconsumption of the earth's space we're going to have to have interventions around even rationing. I don't think we can do that through market mechanisms or through ecological modernisation via technological change but I do think they are part of the transition.

Okay so let's talk about them a little bit. What needs to happen for this hopeful vision which is based on an economy that is measured with different definitions of

growth and wealth etc. What needs to happen between now and then so that that economy can flourish?

BG: What needs to happen is serious political economic transition to a model that is not neoliberal or laissez faire economics which we're still very much attached to and including in its current form austerity governance which is really misnamed because it's not about a form of austerity that might be environmentally beneficial. It's about a form of austerity that is socially, in my view, quite destructive. I can't see us shifting from that political economic model without some serious institutional political shocks, like the manifestation of climate change and possibly some quite disruptive effects of that that will force change and break the consensus on neoliberalism.

What are the main barriers that exist today for your hopeful vision to unfold?

BG: Political economic consensus around neoliberalism which has committed us to a form of market economy that is socially and environmentally depleting. It is quite different from earlier versions, say the welfare state, which could have been, and generally were, environmentally depleting but were socially renewing. The thing about neoliberalism is that it does not renew anything. So until I think that political consensus around that is broken in some way, we're not going to make, in my view, a meaningful transition. It might be through serious large scale disruption forced upon us in which case who knows what model will come out of that. I'm not saying catastrophe. I don't believe in catastrophe. I don't think catastrophe is inevitable but I do see increasingly inevitable serious large scale disruptive and concerning change driven by the manifestation of climate shift and resource depletion and also social stress that's been heightened under this latest period of austerity governance.

You mentioned about your observations of changes in local government, what are they?

BG: Well I think there's more of a political willingness at the local level to acknowledge what higher levels of government don't, that there needs to be action on some of these major issues like climate change, resource depletion, social stress. Probably because that's the level and sphere of government that can change most quickly in political cycles but also where the stressors are now manifesting most starkly in which to

some extent high levels of government have been able to ignore. Local government can act quickly, often even in the context of constrained resources and the quite limited powers of local government has in Australia can nonetheless often move quite quickly to affect change at the local level. So there's an attractiveness about that that makes politics possible and more meaningful.

That's all of my questions. Thank you very much for your time Brendan.

