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# Minister arrives with passion for smart cities

**Urban design** Malcolm Turnbull has demonstrated knowledge, even a passion, for cities of the future in which technology would be married to the needs of citizens, writes **Tony Walker**.

**O**n a recent winter evening in Melbourne then communications and broadband minister Malcolm Turnbull took part in a roundtable dinner discussion about “smart cities” as part of the annual Australian American Leadership Dialogue.

Accompanied by wife, Lucy, a former lord mayor of Sydney, Turnbull was animated by those discussions involving architects and urban planners and presided over by prominent Melbourne businessman and philanthropist Peter Yates.

“Malcolm’s passion for smart cities and building public friendly cities is deep and committed and will be one of his great legacies. This is shared by Lucy,” Yates says.

Among subjects discussed that evening was the “disconnect” between a low interest rate environment which should favour financing urban renewal projects like transport and costs associated with opposition by communities to such projects – so-called nimbyism (not in my backyard).

No one present at that dinner, including, as it happened, *The Australian Financial Review* could have predicted that within a few weeks Turnbull would be Prime Minister, nor that he would be in a position to establish a cabinet post carrying the title: Minister for Cities and the Built Environment.

In the longer run, that cabinet appointment may well prove to be among the more consequential moves of the Turnbull era in one of the world’s most urbanised countries. Eighty per cent of Australians live in cities clinging to the eastern seaboard.

“The cities generate most economic activity in Australia, so we really need the Commonwealth to pay much more attention,” Turnbull said in Sunday’s announcement of his new ministry.

The Prime Minister’s focus on Australia’s cities has been welcomed by the academic and urban planning community at a

moment when urbanisation, accompanied by sprawling metropolises like those of Melbourne and Sydney, is posing enormous challenges to government – local, state and federal.

Ken Maher, president of the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council, whose focus is designing better cities, describes Turnbull’s announcement as a “remarkably good initiative”.

Maher says the Commonwealth’s government’s big challenge will be how to better integrate transport strategies for the big cities in partnership with state governments, including funding.

He described as a “good signal” Turnbull’s apparent focus towards public transport “being key to the cities of the future”.

Robert Freestone, professor of planning in the built environment at the University of NSW, says the country needs a “workable” and “forward-looking” urban agenda to ensure best use is made of limited resources.

Freestone applauds Turnbull’s observation that “roads are not better than mass transit, or vice versa. Each has their place”.

“He’s someone who understands urbanisation: he is an urbanist much more than his predecessors,” Freestone says.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott branded himself the “infrastructure prime minister”. His aggressive championing of road building brought him into conflict with Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews over Andrew’s decision to de-fund the East-West road link in Melbourne. Turnbull would be more likely to seek an accommodation with Andrews on issues like this.

In his contributions to the roundtable held in one of the Victorian State Library’s stately reception rooms, Turnbull demonstrated knowledge, even a passion, for cities of the future in which digital technology would be married to the everyday needs of citizens.

He echoed remarks he had made in a speech a year earlier to a forum in Parramatta where he had laid out a vision for cit-

ies in a modern era as one of the more pressing responsibilities of government.

“The truth is that if we want our cities to be healthier, more productive, more creative; they need to be more like humans and less like cars,” he had said in September 2014 to the ParraConnect forum.

The city of Parramatta lies at the physical centre of a sprawling and, increasingly, traffic-clogged Sydney.

In that speech, Turnbull quoted the American urban economist, Ed Glaeser, who had said: “Those cities where technology and electronic communications are used most intensively are also those with the most intense opportunities for physical engagement, enabled by proximity and density.”

Turnbull singled out New York as an example.

Thus the “minister for broadband” connected the sound bites between a digital age and the needs of humans to interact with each other in their own communities. It was an interesting speech, and one that reflected the range of Turnbull’s public policy interests.

His attachment to public transport – Turnbull’s selfies on trains, ferries and buses have become part of his political persona – more than likely serves a political purpose.

It helps to convey a public image not of Point Piper man gliding around Sydney in a chauffeured limousine, rather a commuter on the 333 omnibus jolting its way down Oxford street.

Cynicism aside, Turnbull’s peregrinations appears to reflect a genuine interest in urban problems, even a liking for public transport.



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Not since Gough Whitlam has Australia had a prime minister who has seemed so energised by issues of urban renewal, now overlaid in Turnbull's case by a digital revolution. In Whitlam's day, the great man's preoccupations had less to do with technological innovation than with how to provide adequate basic services to dwellers in the outer suburbs, including in his own electorate of Werriwa in Sydney's West.

Whitlam's focus then was a backlog of unserved properties in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities. The Labor government committed \$330 million, a huge sum in those days, to clearing the backlog.

"No other western nation has cities in which the incidence of urban sanitation is so primitive ... We are the most effluent nation in what Liberals call the free world", he said.

No other prime minister before him had such a focus on urban development; although Robert Menzies should be given credit for ensuring that Canberra was adequately funded and properly planned via the National Capital Development Commission in the post World War II period. The National Library and other public buildings are a result.

Whitlam's establishment of the Department of Urban and Regional Development under Tom Uren was one of the defining initiatives of the Whitlam era, and involved urban renewal in the inner cities, and decentralisation projects like Albury-Wodonga. Conservative governments have tended to be less committed to such projects that might smack of social engineering. Labor has traditionally been more interventionist, including the Paul Keating Better Cities initiative of the 1990s.

The Labor governments of the Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard years formulated a national urban policy with design protocols.

Under Rudd and Gillard, Labor increased funding for public housing, but leadership tensions dissipated the government's energies. In the end, Labor's policies in the areas of infrastructure and urban renewal lacked focus and energy.

Turnbull now has the opportunity to address, in partnership with the states,

enormous challenges posed by demographic shifts and the need for government to be mindful of quality of life issues, including the provision of adequate public transport.

"Historically, the federal government has had limited engagement with cities, and yet that is where most Australian live," Turnbull said on Sunday.

"It is where the bulk of our economic growth can be found. We often overlook the fact that liveable cities are economic assets."

This is the progressive Turnbull speaking to the chagrin, no doubt, of some of his colleagues.

*Tony Walker is the AFR's international editor. He is a former political editor.*



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PHOTO: ROBERT PEET





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### Long history of nation building

New governments, new schemes, some successes

**Billy Hughes**  
Prime Minister 1915 - 1923



Not long after Federation a submission was put to Prime Minister Billy Hughes by a group of eminent persons to establish a national bureau for planning and federal development.

**Gough Whitlam**  
Prime Minister 1972 - 1975

**Tom Uren**  
Minister for Urban and Regional Development, 1972 - 1975



The first major attempt at urban revitalisation came when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam appointed Tom Uren as the minister in charge of the new **Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD)**. Priorities included, sewerage installation in outer city suburbs, establishment of state land banks, encouragement of local government planning. Expansion of Albury Wadonga to take pressure of Sydney and Melbourne.



Regional Australia, 1970s

**Bob Hawke**  
Prime Minister 1983 - 1991



The Hawke / Keating governments of the early 1980s launched the Building Better Cities program which provided money and planning coordination for rehabilitation of the inner cities of Sydney (Ultimo / Pyrmont), East Perth revival and rebuilding of Honeysuckle in Newcastle.



Darling Harbour, Sydney, 1980s

In 1987 the government planned a "Multi-Function Polis" - a city of 100,000 people. Originally intended for Queensland, later planned for South Australia. It was eventually canned in the face of hostility to the proposed foreign investment base.

**Kevin Rudd**  
Prime Minister 2007 - 2010

**Julia Gillard**  
Prime Minister 2010 - 2013



The governments of **Kevin Rudd** and **Julia Gillard** created the Major Cities Unit within the Federal government and commissioned a series of reports labelled State of Australian Cities, plus the landmark report "National Urban Planning, Our Cities, Our Future", in 2010. The post GFC economic stimulus program also directed money, successfully, to building housing for low income occupants.

**Tony Abbott**  
Prime Minister 2013 - 2015



Prime minister Tony Abbott disbanded the Major Cities Unit and refused, earlier this year, to release the latest "State of Australian Cities" report.

September 20, new Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull appoints a Minister for Cities, **Jamie Briggs** and signals need for focus on "vibrant, liveable cities."



**John Howard**  
Prime Minister 1996 - 2007

The Howard governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s retreated from centralised interventions in planning. Howard launched the Green Street Program for model developments across the country and a program for cutting red tape.



SOURCE: ROBERT FREESTONE, UNIVERSITY OF NSW, FAIRFAX

Graphic: Chris Fowler