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DOOMSDAY AUSTRALIA

Housing shortages, social disintegration and urban decay could be Australia's lot in 40 years without sweeping new initiatives, a new book claims.

2050

ADRIAN TAME

IT'S the year 2050 and 40 million ageing Australians are battling for survival in hideously congested cities, their heavily polluted streets lined with unaffordable homes.

Outside the cities, regional Australia is reeling from an almost total absence of any social or economic infrastructure.

Aboriginal communities are on the edge of disintegration, victims of unenlightened and discriminatory government policies.

A nation once regarded as a beacon of hope for the rest of the planet has self-destructed through a combination of dysfunctional government, mindless planning priorities and the decimation of its manufacturing and agricultural sectors.

Sounds like the script for the latest doomsday horror movie? Think again — it could be the cold, hard

reality of our future, unless we start immediately to rethink our policies and philosophies.

That is the warning presented by a soon-to-be-published book, *Australia 2050 Big Australia?* by futurist and economist Brian Haratsis.

His views are echoed in a second, highly critical assessment of government's role in our future from Dr Ian Winter, executive director of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

Dr Winter believes successive governments have failed to solve our crippling housing affordability crisis, because they deal only with welfare housing, neglecting the issues facing the remaining 95 per cent of the sector.

Mr Haratsis's book is a sweeping, all-inclusive portrait of our nation, its people, its environmental issues, its industry and productivity — and

government is singled out again and again for its failings.

"A lack of national leadership, bereft of clear infrastructure and planning priorities, is derailing Australia's future," writes Mr Haratsis.

He says we have only 30 to 40 years to get the nation back on track and to create a future that will fulfil the needs and aspirations of the 35 million to 40 million-strong population we will have reached then.

A lack of clear direction and accessible information, plus government spin, have stopped Australians questioning bureaucratic decisions made on their behalf, he says.

Mr Haratsis is an enthusiastic supporter of population growth, arguing that it has minor influence on our environment, with cities and towns accounting for only 0.21 per cent of our total land mass.



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He says climate change and insecurity over oil and food supply are deliberately used to intimidate free thinking and problem solving for our future.

This limiting or shrinking of Australia with a small vision for the future restricts population growth and economic development, leading to high aged dependency ratios, reduced access to affordable housing and health care, a reduction in the size of our economy and restricted growth in our resource and agricultural sectors through labour shortages and lack of supporting infrastructure.

"It is time to change the way we think and plan and act for Australia 2050," Mr Haratsis writes.

"We need a bigger vision and we need to challenge the notion that a big Australia is not a sustainable, prosperous Australia. We need to make the transition from a handful of colonial port cities to a national, urban grid."

He believes the last economic boom delivered higher house prices, congested cities and over-burdened



public transport systems.

"Our national infrastructure (including ports and railways) is holding back economic growth and the ranking of our livable cities is slipping," Mr Haratsis writes.

"What were once the world's most livable cities and efficient resource and agricultural sectors have been hammered by increased global competition and new taxes."

He says failure by governments to understand those issues has led to logjams in our ports, traffic congestion, inadequate public

transport and lack of infrastructure caused by reduced spending.

Mr Haratsis speaks of Australia becoming ensnared in a web of red and green tape as incompetent bureaucrats and over-enthusiastic environmentalists hamper progress.

"We have an enormous, mostly uninhabited landmass, yet we have the highest house and land prices in the world," he writes.

"Uncoordinated and unplanned environmental regulations have resulted in a green tourniquet driving up land and resource development costs."

He believes the landmark



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Environment Planning and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999 has introduced costly policies, and delayed planning and property development through the implementation of more than 70 regulations.

"The answer to every environmental issue was to create regulations, plans, master plans, regional plans, strategies, structure plans and green star ratings. The list went on as Australia became mercilessly bound in red and green tape," he writes.

"Infrastructure such as electricity, gas, water and freight suffer from under-investment and ineffective national grids.

"Every state has different town planning systems with different rules; with high compliance costs, poor coordination and largely unmeasurable outcomes," he writes.

"Regional planning in most states is either non-existent or not supported by, or connected to, infrastructure funding.

"In many cases it could be considered to be comic book planning to deliver control to finance obsessed centralist state governments.

"Australia has a crisis of confidence at a time when we most need to make difficult decisions about where we need to live, work and play and invest in the future.

"We have an institutional framework that prevents common

objectives being agreed to and reforms and infrastructure projects being delivered.

"In 2010 fear, rather than

opportunity, has translated into regulation and red and green tape."

He believes this fear of the future is built on a "doomsday" approach to climate change and oil, land and food security, rather than employing technology, globalisation and innovation to support positive solutions.

"In Australia we work and play hard, but we think soft. We have convenient government machinery which blurs responsibility," Mr Haratsis writes.

Dr Winter believes government failure to address the housing affordability crisis stems from a lack of coordination across the various agencies, ministries and departments dealing with the sector.

"Housing is also a politically sensitive area in that it affects such a large proportion of the electorate, so those who should be making decisions balk at doing so," he says.

Dr Winter believes the most disturbing outcome of government failure is that it creates inequality in society.

"This inequality is right across the board, in education, child development, health, and social issues, not just housing," he says.

"International research shows inequality produces bad outcomes for everyone, not just the disadvantaged. The wealthy suffer as well."

He said government failure to understand and come to grips with all markets, particularly the housing sector, is creating this level of inequality and will continue to do so, unless properly addressed.

Mr Haratsis also singles out our treatment of our indigenous people for trenchant criticism.

He cites that only 37 per cent of indigenous people in remote areas complete year 12 compared with 74 per cent of the remote, non-

indigenous population. **Indigenous** children are seven more times likely than non-indigenous children to be placed in care, he says.

He says the problem of indigenous disadvantage is a mess we have been creating for 200 years, and its solution is one of the biggest social challenges we face.

Mr Haratsis believes that by 2050 Australia will have moved from being politically, economically and geographically at the edge of the world to its epicentre, as we become part of an Asia-Pacific union.

And there is scant comfort for those who view the prospect of 40 million Australians by 2050 with dread. By 2100 we should be aiming for 72 million, he believes.

But low-level population growth has already caused ageing and health funding crises.

"The number of Australian workers paying taxes, compared with the number of Australians aged 65 and over, will halve by 2030," he writes.

"This means Australia has one generation (30 years) to reinvent its future, or return to its banana republic status."

Australia 2050 — Big Australia?, published by Macropian Australia at \$49.95

\$9.95 for e download at www.australia2050.com

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