

## A Western Sydney activist's presentation

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Western Sydney has many contradictions bound up in its vast area and the incredible diversity of people who inhabit it. The issue that often unites us is the unholy trinity of housing and infrastructure and environmentalism, and how it plays out in Western Sydney. There is a perception that the people who are activists and environmentalists don't live in Western Sydney. Rightly or wrongly — I'm not game enough to say — there are significant pockets of progressive politics in inner city Sydney. And often that is where the stereotype of the latte-sipping environmentalist emerges. A good or bad thing, again not really my place to say. It does often disregard the large communities that don't live in those areas but who do care about policies and politics of environmentalism, to say nothing of people who live in regional and rural areas.

The only problem is, people from Western Sydney often don't speak about it in terms of "environmentalism," but they might talk about the lack of green space and mature trees, the sticky issue of growth corridors and the infrastructure that needs to operate in order to operate.

Because built into these discussions are environmentalism — the green space and lack of mature trees are result of decades of policies that focused on the growth of housing and the desire to leverage ownership of property as a mark of "making it." Because one of those contradictions is that often there is no form of security more relevant to a significant proportion of its population than the ownership of house(s), especially if

your family comes from disenfranchised or vulnerable communities.

The fact that the sticky question of growth corridors — places where new housing is now emerging — is the result of an understanding that there needs to be continuous sprawl. And this sprawl encourages the destruction of diverse habitats, and if there is some community intervention, only small percentages of the original ecosystems. Thus, the problem of being an environmentalist in a world that focuses on the necessity of human security (an important thing) with the necessity of preserving important ecosystems. Environmentalism in this context is a preserve of those people who already have sufficient resources — traditionally those who come from the inner city and don't have to come up against these sticky issues on the ground because the area they live in has been developed almost from the beginning of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This doesn't reflect the entirety of the Western Suburbs: even a cursory glance at the concerns of Western Sydney shows that the number of people who consider themselves environmentalists is growing. It is routinely one of the most common issues that resonates with large sectors of the population in nationwide polls and discussions, because Western Sydney often has to deal with the brunt of climate change through higher temperatures. The majority working-class populations are effectively considered pawns in ever-changing shifts in climate. This trend is replicated in regional and rural communities.

One way that government support for adapting and building resilience to this is through the provision of useful public transport that works. Currently public transport in Western Sydney is patchy, often marked by a lack of availability, or coverage which reduces its usefulness. The removal of services after certain times means that some working-class people are reduced to walking for kilometres or going home early on a night when they could be having fun. Reducing energy usage of private vehicles is a relatively effective way to demonstrate their commitment to adaptation, both current and future populations. However, the sticky issues of housing sprawl and lower density mean that governments often don't think that is "feasible" and the costs are blown out often due to beneficial deals with corporate partners to build this infrastructure.

The experiences of both others — and me — help make them the starting point for these observations. When I talk about working-class people walking because of a lack of public transport, it is because I often must walk home four kilometres from the station because there is no option other than ride sharing after midnight. It is my reality that I have had to move around before returning

to my parents' small three-bedroom house because there is no security in housing, and that is replicated across every age bracket, and makes me more sympathetic to the concept that housing is assured with security of home ownership.

My engagement as an activist is marked by the need to understand these issues, and in some way the wider observations I have made are because I have engaged with people across a large swathe of communities. Realising that my concerns are reflected across a diversity of people reinforces my activism and participation across a range of environments, including the Royal Society of NSW, where I was invited to speak about some of these challenges.

The reality is that my invitation to speak and produce this article is good but it is rather useless without further action that continues to advocate for a fairer and more equitable approach to the root causes in my community — namely the destruction of ecosystems in order to house working-class people, and the lack of effective infrastructure, despite the colossal economic, social and cultural benefits they provide to NSW and Australia.