

NEW NATION

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FROM the peak of Mt Clarence, Neil Smithson stares out across the great bowl of Albany harbour and the ocean beckoning beyond. With his eyes he sees below him a light, constrained shipping dock, tall silos and a half-empty foreshore. But in his mind he pictures something altogether different — a brand-new port across the channel, a housing-studded shoreline, a heritage-listed old quarter — an Albany transformed, a mini-San Francisco rising amid the hills and bays of Western Australia's near-forgotten south coast.

Smithson is not just a standard-issue visionary: he is something far more significant, a professional planner, armed with the figures to back up his dreams. He has crafted a detailed model — "Rainbow 2000" — for the revitalisation and redesign not just of Albany but of the entire surrounding Great Southern region. Over 30 years, he would see it grow from 55,000 to a quarter of a million people.

This is planning on the heroic scale: it embraces not just economics but politics, it amounts to human engineering — and it suggests a path of dramatic expansion, one that he believes could be applied to several other regional centres across Australia — Mildura, for instance, Wagga, Geraldton or Townsville. It is, put simply, the largest free-standing economic development initiative proposed in this country in the past 20 years.

And just who is Neil Smithson? 38 years old, and clearly a man of extravagant ambitions and thought patterns, a planner experienced in "four States, 11 regions, 38 cities and a lot of hush" — a technocrat, more than an intellectual, a man whose life is measured out in council meetings and building applications. The blueprint for his scheme, of course, is not just about bricks and mortar. It contains 100 projects and aims to generate \$5 billion in investment and 30,000 jobs over 30 years. More than that, it goes to the heart of how Australian society functions, how we work together and see ourselves as communities. It offers a new variant of reconciliation, embraces immigration, holds out particular opportunities for young people. On these grounds alone, it deserves a brief hearing.

Unsurprisingly, reaction in Albany to the arrival of this human cyclone and all his big ideas has been mixed. Smithson has literally set up shop in the city centre and laid out his proposals in the window, where they are scrutinised by a discreet flow of passers-by.

Smithson first came to Albany as a little boy on a family holiday. He fell in love with it, when he came back in 1967. He found a city strangely blocked in its development. Its port and grain silos



Vision: Neil Smithson looks over Albany harbour, a natural theatre of opportunity

Big picture man

A West Australian planner has an extraordinary recipe for revitalising the regions. His vision of the future is about to face the ultimate test

by check by how well with the city centre. For all its natural beauty, and its historic role as the west's first place of settlement, Albany seemed to him a curiously staid kind of place.

Smithson imagined a new kind of city, a capital of tourism and culture, a regional hub, its commercial, industrial and residential centres no longer intermingled but inter-related. His key proposal had the boldness of all original ideas: change Albany, its entire mental and economic geography, by moving the port, dock, stock and loading docks from the city foreshore to Vancouver Peninsula, the vacant opposite arm of the horseshoe harbour. Fund the move by privatising part of the port, and by selling off the foreshore land for housing. Build a beachfront district instead, with hotels, galleries, a cultural

centre, even a small casino or two. Preserve old Albany as an "English" quarter, much like the "French" heart of New Orleans. The elaborately worked-out details of this scheme are perhaps of chief interest to the locals.

What's rather more intriguing for the rest of the country are the social and co-operative mechanisms the devices for meshing together people's interests that Smithson feels would help to realise his vision: first, the State and federal governments would have to declare Albany a special economic development zone. Over five years, unemployment benefits would be phased out, cut by 20 per cent each year. In their place would come a US-style redundancy insurance scheme. If you lost your job, you would receive your past two years' tax, either as a lump sum to

provide start-up funds for self-employment or as a monthly credit for training. The money saved by this measure would go into a capital works development program — a huge "work for the dole" scheme.

The key notion is that welfare, handed down from on high, would be replaced by the opportunity to help build a regional future. Native title over Albany would be extinguished by agreement. Instead, all new businesses would give five per cent of their tax bill to a special fund to support Aboriginal start-up businesses and would be encouraged to take on Aboriginal employees. Here the notion is also plain: instead of bargaining between communities, persuade both to share a stake in the success of each other's business ventures. As Smithson's rather startling

policy document has it, this would mark a "major cultural change for Albany and the Great Southern region".

Indeed, self-reliance and self-determination in place of long-term social welfare; community service instead of youth unemployment. "This would mean," says Smithson, "that by the year 2005 the region would be an economic development zone where the residents choose to live because of the nature of employment and lifestyle opportunities available." Albany in other words, would attract those with open, vivid mental horizons: it would build itself into a social and economic alternative.

Smithson knows "Rainbow 2000" is strong meat. Vested interests, regional politicians, the welfare system — the cosy antipathies of black-white relations — there's nothing it leaves untouched. It fights against the centralising trend towards vast capitals and depleted regions; it thinks big in a time of limits; it challenges politically enshrined assumptions. It is the triumph of plan and reason over sentiment and convention. It is, of course, the embodiment of a practical philosophy, founded on a clear conception of Australia's character and potential. "If you're not in a growth mode, you're in a decline mode," says Smithson.

"Change, today, is inevitable. But there's still a tendency in Australian society for people to think everything should be provided for them at no cost by the Government. I think we have lost sight of what social welfare can be constructed to mean, and we've moved towards encouraging a culture of social dependency. How to address that if not by giving people a choice?"

Economic growth. If not the answer, is this means to a greater end — for larger regional cities, about 150,000 people, achieve a kind of lifeline, Smithson argues, a point at which they can sustain entertainment, academic, and international standard civic facilities. Growth, too, can simply help create a economically, a sense of bond between people. His world-view focuses on what can be managed, what can be balanced: ecological concerns, social priorities, even population levels — for just as he wants a quarter-million-strong, interconnected Great Southern, he accepts that there will be regional threshold population targets set in the next 50 years and Australia will have to decide how many people it can sustain in a productive relationship.

For Smithson, Australia is the place of the possible, a go-ahead land of opportunity. "Where you can establish yourself and do your own thing, where there's safety and a degree of freedom that doesn't exist elsewhere."

"A majority of Australians are very positive, happy-go-lucky, we take things in our stride, we are not afraid to address issues — we're just looking for some direction." Directions of Smithson's kind?

This story of a plan has an unusual, unfinished coda: after two years in Albany, his blueprint complete, Smithson announced last month that he would stand, against a clutch of local notables, for election as mayor. His platform: "Rainbow 2000". And so it is that on May 1, polling day, the citizens of Albany confront two alternatives: business roughly as usual, easy-paced and predictable — or a well-planned social and economic revolution on their doorstep. Unlike the people of most of Australia's embattled regional cities, they at least have a choice.