

CHRISTCHURCH TOMORROW

A discussion of the future development  
of Christchurch as a Regional Centre.

by

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## 1.

This discussion is about the goals and aspirations that the citizenry of Christchurch should adopt in planning the future development of their city. It leaves aside any consideration of the likely success or failure in achieving these objectives and concentrates rather on what the objectives should be with regard especially to the city as a regional centre.

The discussion is developed by first considering three topics that largely provide the framework within which the future of Christchurch will inevitably be decided. These topics are:

1. The dimensions of the region dominated by Christchurch.
2. The recent changes within the Christchurch region.
3. The general form that regional policy should take in New Zealand.

These discussions provide the necessary background to considering the final topic:

4. The objectives that Christchurch should strive for both for itself and its surrounding region.

### 1. The Christchurch Region

Cities arise initially from the demand for services generated by the rural areas surrounding them. Thus they provide, among other things, an entry point for imports and a final assembly point for exports associated with rural activities. If these rural activities prosper and grow so too does the urban centre; it adds to its range of services, its population grows and provides an increased demand for products from the rural hinterland, and enables self-sustaining

activities of an urban nature to be supported. If this mutually beneficial development of urban and rural activity proceeds far enough the city becomes increasingly more independent of the conditions prevailing in the surrounding rural economy. However as the economic ties with rural activity become relatively less important to the city, its inhabitants look increasingly to the surrounding countryside for relaxation and recreation. Thus the urban and rural communities remain mutually interdependent although the nature of the relationship tends to change with city growth; urban dwellers become less conscious of their dependence on the rural environment while the rural dwellers become increasingly conscious of the importance of the major city for productive services as well as consumption and cultural facilities. Nevertheless the urban dweller depends upon the surrounding rural environment for recreation and relaxation to a greater extent than is commonly acknowledged.

Christchurch has long since reached a size at which self-sustaining urban activities dominate those that are closely and directly linked with rural activities even though the full number and importance of the latter would undoubtedly surprise most of its inhabitants. This being so, with the city being predominantly concerned with its own urban activities, it is more fruitful to approach the question of how widespread is that rural hinterland from the viewpoint of those outside of the city.

Central and North Canterbury undoubtedly look towards Christchurch as their principal cultural centre and as the main-spring of business and financial activity throughout the area. In fact the complete area for which Christchurch fulfils these roles is probably the whole of Canterbury and possibly beyond, particularly to the north and west. For instance, day shopping

trips to Christchurch are made from Westland and for Kaikoura residents a choice between Christchurch and centres to the north is a real necessity for many facilities, including especially professional services. For some services such as specialist hospital treatment the whole of the South Island north of Otago may be involved.

The position is then that while we lack adequate statistical evidence of the precise extent to which different regional activities depend upon Christchurch, this dependence is nevertheless very real and significant. Much of Christchurch business activity is influenced by developments well beyond the city limits; some, such as fertiliser manufacture to a marked degree, while others such as retailing to a lesser but still significant extent. The areas of significant influence therefore differ from activity to activity and no one area can be drawn within which Christchurch is the dominant influence for all aspects of social and economic life but beyond which it has no influence. However, Christchurch is undoubtedly the dominant influence for a very considerable geographical area and it must remain concerned about the changing economic and social conditions within this region.

## 2. Recent Regional Changes

Taking Canterbury to represent Christchurch's region, since suitable statistics are published only on this basis, then over the last decade its region has increased in population by about 50,000. This has represented a growth of 9 per cent between 1961 and 1966 and 6 per cent between 1966 and 1971 and in general has been one per cent less than the growth of New Zealand's total population. This below-average growth rate has been characteristic of all regions (statistical areas) except

Central Auckland and South Auckland/Bay of Plenty; in other words only the latter two regions have increased their share of New Zealand's total population, all remaining regions having declined steadily in importance. Canterbury is thus no exception in this regard but with 14 per cent of New Zealand's population is still one of the Big Four [Central Auckland (25 per cent), Wellington (19 per cent) and South Auckland/Bay of Plenty (15 per cent)]. However Otago, which in 1926 had a larger share of population than South Auckland, has now, with only 6 per cent of the population, clearly dropped to the Minor League.

The growth in Canterbury's population between 1966 and 1971 was accounted for almost entirely by the natural increase of the indigenous population although there was a marginal net in-migration of 1,100 people. All other regions suffered a net out-migration of population during this period except Central Auckland which gained substantially (6 per cent) from migratory movements (although this was still less than its gain from the natural increase of the existing population).

But changes within the Canterbury region are perhaps more important for present purposes. These in general have been similar to those of most of the rest of the country, namely a movement of population out of the rural areas into the towns and cities and also an increasing concentration of population in the cities rather than in the smaller urban centres.

Of the 21 counties within Canterbury nearly half (10) were estimated to have smaller populations in April 1974 than they had in the 1971 census. But only 3 of the 19 county towns, boroughs and cities showed a decline. In general there has been a steady rural to urban movement into the largest urban centres, particularly of course into the Christchurch Urban Area itself, which now represents 70 per cent of Canterbury's

total population. In total some 85 per cent of Canterbury's population are urban dwellers, that is, live in towns of 1000 or more people. This degree of urbanisation is much higher than the average for the South Island regions and exceeds the average for the North Island regions also. However it may have stabilised at this level which was recorded in the 1971 census and has been estimated to be the same since then.

The extent of urban rather than rural living in Canterbury is thus very high by any standards; in the United States only 73.5 per cent of the population was classed as urban in 1970 and for the United Kingdom the comparable figure was 78 per cent in 1971. However the changes towards increasing urbanisation are steady and inexorable rather than rapid; the Christchurch Urban Area, as defined by the Department of Statistics, accounted for 68.4 per cent of Canterbury's population in 1966 and this has increased by less than two per cent since then. Indeed it is likely, judging from experience overseas, that a plateau in urban living may have been reached and may be followed eventually by a movement back to rural dwelling to a limited extent.

Such movements of population confirm the existence of many other crucial changes affecting all aspects of the lives of people living in Christchurch's rural hinterland. People move for a wide variety of reasons but the effects of dwindling numbers are without exception deleterious to those remaining in the communities surrounding Christchurch. Few of these communities have ever been large enough to be immune to the problems of maintaining facilities and the quality of community life as people leave. Many have been at the threshold of social viability for many years and a handful of families leaving the community presents a major threat. Providers of services such as storekeepers, blacksmiths, engineers and garages



are among the first affected followed by schools and churches. Branches of large firms such as stock-agents remain longer but can carry less stock and must rely on time-consuming deliveries from central depots to meet an increasing proportion of orders. In these and many other ways the standard of rural life declines as people drift away to the city. Furthermore, once initiated this process tends to reinforce itself and therefore becomes increasingly difficult to reverse.

### 3. Regional Policies for New Zealand

The movement of population from rural to urban communities and also between regions as discussed above, is the main feature of New Zealand's so-called regional problem. All the Western-type economies have suffered from similar difficulties arising from uneven rates of development which leave some regions lagging behind and declining in importance economically, socially and politically. This causes concern most particularly to those who are disadvantaged, perhaps for no easily recognisable reason and through no fault of their own.

As yet no country has evolved a particularly effective solution to the problem in spite of spending very large sums of public money and producing reams of learned papers.

The most common features of problem regions overseas are low incomes and persistent unemployment. Neither of these symptoms appear to occur in New Zealand although the increasing dominance and continuing rate of growth of Central Auckland and the gradual decline of the rest of New Zealand, especially the South Island, are clear evidence that we have a regional problem.

It appears that New Zealand's special characteristics in this regard are on the one hand a particularly small total population and, on the other, a particularly mobile one whose redistribution is not hampered by distinctive local differences forged over many generations. Certainly it is the mobility that has been the main feature of the developing problem so far.

But the smallness of the population base is also important and is leading to more and more communities approaching the limit below which economic and social viability is threatened; shops and services cannot be supported, schools close and are amalgamated, religious life is similarly influenced and medical facilities are that much further away. This is most true of the rural areas at present but many small and medium sized towns must be experiencing similar difficulties with more to follow.

The principal implication that I draw from this is that solutions which are considered must

- (a) maintain and bolster existing large centres in order to provide a sufficient population base to support developments such as medical facilities, universities, orchestras, theatres and the like, and
- (b) ensure at least some minimum standard of living and quality of life for those who choose not to live in such very large urban centres.

Fortunately the former seems likely to be satisfied on present trends of urbanisation and urban concentration, providing of course that this process is not interfered with by deliberate policy. However the latter requirement is made still more difficult because of this very process of rural depopulation and city growth and here policy is most clearly needed. The policy will have to take a form that does not

detract significantly from the development of the large centres, it will require more resources than are presently available locally and so must be nationally co-ordinated and it must be widespread in terms of its geographic or spatial coverage.

A network of small to medium sized towns would seem to be one possible solution. These would need to be dispersed but with well-developed communications both between themselves and especially with the large city centre to which they would look for many specialist services and facilities and cultural activities. No doubt many of these small urban and rural communities would require outside support, perhaps in the form of rates subsidies or similar, non-specific, general assistance.

Relying on general assistance to needy communities rather than directing new investment into particular work-creating ventures, represents an important choice in favour of leaving the great bulk of decision taking to be made by local individuals. This also minimises the influence of central Government on the specific nature of local development. The principal reason for opting for such general, non-specific aid, which may indeed produce slower and less dramatic results than direct investment in a factory for instance, rests on the belief that morale and local community spirit is least endangered by this approach. Assuming that there is likely to be a substantial degree of permanency associated with any form of assistance to disadvantaged areas, it is preferable that the individual's welfare is not seen to be directly and immediately dependent on a hand-out of Government funds. Such spiritually harmful dependence would seem to be greatest when employment is threatened as soon as a specific Government subsidy is withdrawn. On the other hand if a similar level of assistance is directed through the local authority so that the general rate is lower, or the roads in better condition or the local maternity hospital

better equipped or the library better stocked, then the individual's welfare is enhanced largely unobtrusively, without obvious dependency and with a minimum risk to morale. The community would benefit similarly, with local initiative being responsible for new investment and developments; these might come more slowly but the community would be healthier and hence more durable in the long run.

#### 4. Objectives for Christchurch

Whether or not Christchurch adopts a positive interest in its region probably rests mostly on the potential benefits to the city from the suitable development of the region. These benefits would include

- (a) the provision of an appropriate aesthetic setting in which this very gem of a city would rest comfortably;
- (b) a contribution to the population base supporting some of its facilities;
- (c) the economic basis for a significant part of the city's total employment, but predominantly
- (d) a very substantial sporting and recreational resource.

The importance of the last group of benefits can hardly be overstated in my view. The significance of the potential contribution to the sporting and recreational needs of the people of Christchurch from the land and water resources of the region is almost certainly as great as that provided by all the various forms of entertainment, sporting and cultural activities within the city boundaries.

The sporting and general recreational aspects of the region around Christchurch need to be dealt with separately. The sporting and specific recreational facilities, such as skiing, yachting, hunting, tramping, fishing, etc, mostly have sectional interests who, as a group, can champion their own cause in terms of the necessary developments, accessibility, etc. It is through these particular recreational activities that the citizens of Christchurch especially invest in the rural areas outside of the city. However this much needed investment is largely confined to the specific localities most suited to the sport or the particular recreation concerned. It is the less well-defined but very widespread benefits and pleasures of the general rural environment that perhaps need some special consideration.

Such evidence as is available on recreational pursuits has emphasised the importance of week-end trips into the countryside and casual picnicking by families and more organised group and club outings. In assessing how well Christchurch's rural hinterland meets these needs it is necessary to distinguish its large scale features from the more detailed, small-scale and localised features.

The large scale features of the area around Christchurch are truly excellent; good beaches, large and interesting rivers and unparalleled mountains, all of which provide excellent opportunities for the development of those particular sporting and recreational pursuits to which they give rise, as well as being of immense value to the general public. All that is required on this scale beyond the efforts of the organised groups is to avoid despoilation, to ensure reasonable access and to provide minimal supporting facilities such as rest areas, signposts, information and so on.

On the smaller-scale, however, where the results of man's own activities predominate rather than the large geographical features, the situation is rather different. Here there are no appropriate sectional interests to ensure reasonable development and for most a degree of isolation and freedom from the madding crowd are the essential recreational attributes of the rural environment. Hence individuals remain largely isolated from one another and no organised concern for facilities can develop.

What ideally the rural environment should be like to satisfy and refresh the visitor most effectively is really beyond definition but most would probably agree on the things that detract from rather than contribute to its enjoyment. Some must be more aware than others of the inevitable power poles, pylons and the drooping wires that join them, but few would find them appealing. Similarly, advertising hoardings are widely condemned but persist and multiply in spite of brave policy statements. For most, I suspect, the countryside needs to look cared for and purposefully managed with trimmed hedges, fences in good repair, the occasional functional building and crops and livestock in a thriving and well tended condition. Taken together these things might well be seen as a barometer of prosperity in the rural sector.

On a somewhat larger scale the same general air of unobtrusive order in the pattern of land use is also desirable. Over recent years deliberate policy measures by various local authorities have been introduced to influence the pattern of land development. In general these have gradually increased the minimum size of subdivisions of rural properties with a view to reducing the loss of productive agricultural land. Whether or not these policies have been successful in this regard is open to debate but they have had the effect of increasing the amount

of capital available for development; those who can afford to purchase twenty acres seem also able to finance the erection of high quality houses and the ancillary development of the block. While the individual properties are frequently admirable and highly satisfactory in themselves, the overall pattern of land use that has resulted is somewhat strange. For a wide area around Christchurch a well-cared for rural scene is now about as liberally provided with high quality, often two storey dwellings as it is with shelter belts. Furthermore the distribution of houses and shelter belts through the large paddocks also shows some similarity in the randomness with which they are scattered!

In my own view this type of development is unsatisfactory largely because it has missed the opportunity that existed to channel this much needed investment in the rural areas into identifiable communities; small, low density residential areas with individual properties varying up to three or five acres. Development along these lines would have met the growing demand for rural residences, produced new, or enhanced existing, communities and almost certainly would have involved the loss of less land in total from full commercial production.

The loss of better class land to urban or residential use is apparently the major guide for the present land-use planning, as far as it is possible to identify such planning. I should perhaps explain why I think this is a most unsatisfactory criterion on which to base urban development.

Any decisions about land-use obviously involve choices and these must be evaluated as objectively as possible. We should add up all the costs and benefits associated with a possible change of land use, say from agriculture to residential. The agriculturalist is immediately aware of the loss of production, equivalent, let us assume, to a capitalised value of \$1000 per acre.

The capitalised value in residential use is usually much greater but may be felt to be induced by the artificial restrictions that influence the market. These restrictions certainly exist and have an effect, but in general, market values in residential use may be expected to be high, not only because of the intrinsic value of a particular site for such use but also because the total costs and benefits to society of residential development are very considerable. The cost of land usually represents a minor part of the total investment; costs and benefits involved in total might be some forty or fifty times as great as those applying to agricultural use.

Really successful residential development can be counted among society's most valuable assets; unsuccessful development can be little short of a disastrous road to social problems that can become a major and lasting burden on society. With these kind of stakes involved the productivity value of land in agricultural use seems relatively minor; it should not be overlooked but equally it should not be used as the major planning consideration.

#### Summary of Objectives

Collecting together the various points developed above the following criteria emerge as the most appropriate guidelines for those responsible for Christchurch as it approaches the year 2000.

1. The need to maintain a thriving and developing large city centre to act as the major cultural and financial hub of its very large region.
2. The need to avoid curtailing the growth of an adequate population base to support and justify such costly cultural activities and fully developed financial, medical and educational facilities as only a major city can provide.



3. The need to contribute to the development of a desirable and pleasing rural environment within its large regional hinterland, including the major sporting and recreational facilities that this can offer.
4. The need to foster additional residential accommodation beyond the existing city boundary but in a form that will enhance the development of Christchurch also. (For example, moderately sized suburban type developments at choice locations within commuting distance would achieve this.)
5. The desirability of ensuring that any additional growth potential is directed towards small and medium sized towns suitably dispersed through the region in order to improve the services available to rural populations.

Finally, it is clear that many of these goals can only be achieved if communications of all types, but especially transportation, are developed to a high degree throughout the region and between Christchurch and its very important rural hinterland.

### In Conclusion

What the future holds for Christchurch is likely to be significantly influenced by developments within its rural hinterland. The development of major international winter sports facilities will bring not only many tourists but will also generate significant associated investment in accommodation, restaurants, sports equipment manufacture, and so on, from which Christchurch will benefit. The diversion of inter-island freight via Picton had an impact on Christchurch's development as will the recent decision to make Lyttelton a container port. These influential issues are decided on the conditions prevailing in the area

around Christchurch and beyond as much as on the impact on Christchurch itself. Similarly phase two of the container port development and the siting of a second crane will rest upon developments in the region as a whole, including such matters as the growth of coal exports from Westland.

These are examples of the reasons why Christchurch's business community must remain alive to conditions outside of the city itself and to these can be added the possible creation of a new major city centre.

Such a new centre as close as the present proposals for Rolleston would clearly give Christchurch the full benefit of this boost in economic activity, particularly in the short-run. But the concentration of all growth in one location on the periphery of the city presents problems in itself and should Rolleston succeed and become a distinct entity as intended, it would be to Christchurch's disadvantage in the long-run. As Rolleston's population grew Christchurch would inevitably find that the demand for most of its facilities increased without there being any offsetting source of additional revenue. Should Rolleston eventually become a truly independent city itself then Christchurch would have a lasting legacy of over-developed and under-utilised public facilities. Much of its business activity would have experienced a similar cycle of expansion followed by a future dominated by permanent investment commitments well in excess of the needs of its static population. The possibility also exists that, once initiated, Rolleston's growth rate will be greater than that of the region as a whole and, if so, then it will inevitably draw people and investment mainly away from Christchurch itself. The economic base on which Christchurch's population depends is far from immune to these and similar developments.

That Christchurch should be outward-looking in these matters seems self-evident but this approach should also prevail in general. The city should, in its own interests, be aware of the conditions prevailing for the mainly rural communities closely related to it. The possibility of large-scale irrigation in Canterbury leading to an increased intensity of land-use and large expansion in farm output, together with the ancillary urban-based investment and employment that would follow, should not be overlooked by those charged with guiding Christchurch towards the year 2000. Similarly, in the interests of preserving and further improving the recreational facility of a thriving and viable countryside for Christchurch's urban population to enjoy, the city should become actively involved with rural issues as far as possible. Support for roading expenditure, rest areas and picnic site development, township domains, etc. are some of the immediate areas that might be pursued. The Regional Planning Authority might present further opportunities and eventually large cities such as Christchurch might well find it worthwhile to offer direct financial support to surrounding local authorities for particular projects of mutual interest.

Local authorities have jointly pressed Government to provide part of their revenue from general taxation and the principles that support such a claim are really the same as those assumed above. That is that local authority finance should be spread more evenly over the total population of income earners and thereby should also benefit automatically from rising incomes. Similarly, the increasing concentration of people into large cities raises difficulties of undue financial stress on local authorities in the surrounding areas from which the population has moved. Christchurch, like other large dominant regional centres, should therefore concern itself, and to the extent of financial commitment,

with the problems of these areas, both on the grounds of equity and also of self-interest in the business generating potential and the recreational value of a thriving rural environment.

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