Abstract Distress signals rallied the politicians, community leaders and residents of Albury to oppose political decisions that seemed to threaten the well-being and growth of the city three times in the last quarter century. Twice Albury's daily newspaper pushed itself forward to act as a community champion by running extraordinary press campaigns. In June 1977, as the Border Morning Mail, it rallied protests against the Fraser Government's decision to cut funding to the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre project under a bar line 'Growth SOS'. In June 1995, as the Border Mail (it changed name in July 1988), it ran a similar campaign, rallying protests with the slogan 'Save Our Cities' against the Keating Government's decision formally to end the growth centre project and retrieve Commonwealth investment. At the end of 1995, 'Save Our Cities' slipped into another 'Save Our City' rallying cry, this time not for the press, but instead for a group of Albury citizens protesting against the proposed choice of a new highway route through rather than around Albury. All three distress signals were calls to political action. The newspaper campaigns were short, sharp and effective. On each occasion government modified the proposal that had stirred protest. On the other hand, the citizen action group campaigns were long, divisive and, in the end, comparatively ineffective. The bypass issue became a local obsession, looming as a factor in all six of the local, state and federal government polls that voters in the City of Albury were obliged to attend between 1995 and 2003. The issue was enmeshed into the politicking and electioneering at all three tiers of government. It excited consternation and passion. It was the central concern for voters at the state election in 1999 and was still a major concern in the subsequent state election in 2003. The local, 'our town' issues centred on urban development led voters in a regional city to challenge the pattern of established party representation in 1978 and to flirt with independent rather than party representation, just over twenty years later.

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**Albury — the regional city, the electorate and its principal political concerns**

Albury has been one of several inland cities in New South Wales that have grown apace in recent times. Along with other places like Orange, Dubbo, Tamworth, Queanbeyan and Wagga Wagga, Albury has grown and expects to grow further as a service provider to a substantial region. Enjoying population and employment growth with rising resident incomes, Albury-Wodonga is one of Australia’s regional hubs.ii

Scholars have traced economic explanations for the way in which the state, indeed the nation, has become sprinkled with such regional hubs. A Productivity Commission Report in 1999 referred to several of them as ‘sponge cities’ drawing population from their surrounds as the rural workforce declines in number. Small towns within a thirty-minute drive of a major centre now survive principally as satellite dormitory settlements. More recently some scholars have looked to the political implications of the emergence of this urban sprinkle in New South Wales. Changes in the economy and demography have seen the workforce of regional cities become more dominantly white collar. Regional city electorates, the scholars suggest, have taken on ‘the political quality of suburban electorates’.iii
Both the federal and state electorate in which Albury was placed became conservative party strongholds. At the federal level, Farrer was held by the Liberal Party until Tim Fischer won and held it for the National Country Party/National Party from 1984 to 2001. After Fischer resigned, Sussan Ley regained it for the Liberal Party. At the state level, the seat of Albury, has been held by the Liberal Party since the Second World War, except for Harold Mair’s stint as a Labor member between 1978 and 1988 and C.J. Hurley’s five months in office in 1946.

The state’s major regional centres crave the look and feel of cities. They have undergone main street conversions to reinvigorate their commercial centres with pedestrian-friendly malls, modern street furniture and public art. Supermarkets grow bigger and small specialist shops more varied. Like Sydney and Melbourne, they try to catch attention with events, be they country music or motor racing festivals. They boast a wide range of cultural and sporting facilities and activities that indicate rich and varied lifestyles. Tourism promotion assures residents as well as visitors of the ready availability of fine food, night life entertainments and lively music, drama and visual art experiences. Such publicity efforts help communities to feel better about themselves and so influence their abilities to attract new investment. In a more targeted fashion the cities attract or hold the young with higher education opportunities. They lure the retired from the metropoles with cheaper housing and assurances that regional city communities score highly on measures of well-being involving, for example, resident feelings of personal safety and community connectedness. Television and radio networking have complicated matters, but wherever possible, the generation of local and regional news services is important in establishing a city’s identity.

Publicists are rarely modest and in the late 1990s Albury-Wodonga’s investment promotion body boasted that it was ‘Beautifully placed’. Albury City Council’s motto was ‘City of Excellence’. It
had no single niche event to entice once-a-year visitors, but Albury acquired palatial licensed club venues on the proceeds gathered over a decade from providing Victorians’ access to poker machines. Its unique Flying Fruit Fly Circus developed into an Albury-Wodonga signature piece — ‘ordinary kids doing extraordinary things’. Municipal support for the circus training school was explained as necessary in the early years, for ‘a city that promotes itself as a real alternative to life in the capitals must provide more that kerb and guttering — it must be seen to offer cultural and community diversity, among other things’.\textsuperscript{ix} Albury-Wodonga’s Border Mail developed into one the state’s largest regional newspapers. It kept abreast of technological change and used colour and poster front-pages well ahead of other regionals. For many readers it has become a substitute for rather than a supplement to metropolitan newspapers. It has a wide sphere of influence and had helped establish a border identity.

Like the other regional centres, Albury has settled to the role of being a service provider. This has meant it looks closely for the largesse that can be won from state and commonwealth governments.\textsuperscript{x} Albury has vied over a long time with its nearest same-state rival, Wagga Wagga, to ensure that it gets its share of state government funding for high schools, technical and further education colleges, universities, hospitals, court houses, police stations and road and rail services. Increase in the provision of such services has meant job and therefore population growth. More recently, with the dismantling of the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre, the city monitors developments in its cross-river neighbour Wodonga. Its competition with Wodonga, however, is for private rather than public sector development and is restrained, for both cities share the same labour force. As a quarter of the workforce lives in one state and works in the other, new jobs in both places are Albury-Wodonga jobs.
Unlike other regional cities, Albury enjoyed an unusual boost to its development as the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre from 1973 to 1995. This was the nation’s major experiment in selective decentralisation, drawing in $140 million of Commonwealth government funding. As a result Albury-Wodonga holds a unique place in any accounts of government assistance to regional development. The two towns had been growing well through the previous decade, but from about the turn into the 1970s the Commonwealth, Victoria and New South Wales fostered accelerated growth. Originally it was hoped that the Growth Centre would develop as ‘another Canberra’ with relocated public service departments. That did not eventuate, though the Commonwealth did establish large Australian Taxation Office and Australian Army presences. The major contributions of the states was to assist in the location of some large firms: Uncle Ben’s of Australia Pty Ltd Pet Food factory to Wodonga, Borg-Warner’s automotive transmissions factory to Albury, and Australian Newsprint Mills to a site just north of Albury.

Subsequent growth strategies focused on attracting private investment. Attention narrowed to developing a distribution centre and a manufacturing centre. Companies were attracted to Albury-Wodonga for there were good road, rail and communication links, particularly with Melbourne. There were no problems with the availability of water and power. There was a sufficient pool of skilled and semi-skilled male and female labour, because there was already some local industrial activity. Improvements in transport infrastructure have always been considered a powerful economic stimulus to a regional centre.\textsuperscript{\text{ix}}

The Growth Centre project formally ended in 1995 leaving a physical and cultural legacy. Most of the huge 24 000 hectare land bank has now been sold, but the hills and flood plain that proved unsuitable for other development have become bush-land parks. New industrial and residential estates
have been carefully planned. Over 300 000 trees and shrubs were planted in one of the biggest urban reafforestation programs ever undertaken in Australia. One of the most important roles of the Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation was the manufacturing and selling of the image of Albury-Wodonga. It had to market the location to private enterprise and to potential immigrants. In alerting the nation to the potential of the ‘National Growth Centre’, it portrayed Albury-Wodonga as a place with unusual vitality. It was a place that attracted those who sought the excitement and stimulation of being involved in the experiment of establishing a city on the border between the two most populous states. Albury-Wodonga was a brand name that won national recognition and carried, in the main, positive overtones. It attracted considerable private investment.

The unravelling of the Growth Centre has caused political tensions, especially over the suggestion that Albury and Wodonga might continue to develop in synergy with each other by becoming One City. The idea received little support when first mooted in 1994-96 and again in 2001. Albury and Hume Shire voters rejected it at voluntary polls conducted in 2002. Since then both Albury and Wodonga have continued to assert individual identities. Both adopted new council logos, re-developed their central business districts and went in independent pursuit of investment opportunities.

Census results indicate that comparatively high proportions of the Albury electorate’s workforce have been and still are employed in manufacturing (14 per cent of males and 10 per cent of females in 1971; and 17 per cent of the workforce in 2001). Electorates with similar high concentrations of manufacturing industry usually voted Labor. Albury remained an outstanding exception to that pattern, showing that manufacturing in country areas could inspire different political allegiance. Census results also show that by 2001 the Albury electorate had a much
expanded service industries sector, including, for example, education (7 per cent) and health/community services (11 per cent). Much of this occupational shift related to the increase in female participation from 1947 (17 per cent, Upper Murray) to 2001 (45 per cent, Albury). The steady growth of jobs in retailing, administration, financial and professional services ensures that Albury, like Wagga Wagga and other regional centres, has a large white collar workforce.

Census results also show that the number of people employed in rural occupations have declined to a mere 3 per cent of the workforce. This reflects a national occupational shift rather than an electoral boundary change. Still, there has been some tinkering with the boundaries of the state electorate and the local government authority. Electoral Commissioners in balancing the size of electorates have had trouble making sense of Albury’s hinterland. Holbrook and Tumbarumba were in Albury until 1999 when they moved briefly to Wagga Wagga. Culcairn and Corowa were in Sturt, held by Tim Fischer 1971-1980. Culcairn moved to Albury in 1982 and Corowa to Albury in 1999. The local government boundary expanded into the surrounding Hume Shire in 1962, 1980 and 2003, but Albury never acquired a swathe of land similar to that which Wagga Wagga gained by amalgamations in 1972.

Growth SOS

The Growth Centre project ran into difficulties with the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. The Fraser Government saw little sense in the experiment. It held three internal departmental inquiries into what it might do to withdraw from it. Withdrawal was not easy for the Commonwealth’s investment had been considerable and binding agreements had been reached with the state governments. The project had to be unravelled carefully, even tenderly, if the
Commonwealth was to recoup its investment. As a first step the Commonwealth suggested limiting any further investment to a level that states might match. Not surprisingly both states were reluctant to fund what they saw as a Commonwealth initiative.

Residents of Albury-Wodonga grew uneasy as the deadline for setting new funding arrangements approached and no agreement was in sight. In June 1977 the *Border Morning Mail* made extraordinary efforts to rally support for the Growth Centre project ahead of a crucial inter-government meeting. Headlines predicted dire outcomes. Excited editorials called for action. There was a prospect of widespread unemployment and bankruptcies in the border district, if there were no more government funding for the project. Private and public bodies had initiated investments based on the project having more than a four-year life. This was a ‘Growth SOS’.

Feelings ran high. The editor of the *Border Morning Mail* saw Albury-Wodonga going from ‘Growth Centre to Ghost Centre’. The Mayor of Albury, Harold Mair, explained that Albury City Council had accepted the Commonwealth’s offer of funds on a third grant, two-thirds loan basis to undertake infrastructure improvements. It had borrowed to build a new council office with office space to lease as public service offices. It had calculated such borrowings against an expectation that the rate base would significantly increase. If the project collapsed, the council could be bankrupted.

The Albury-Wodonga Businessmen’s Association and the Albury Regional Promotion Council organised a summit meeting, inviting political and council representatives to air their feelings about the lack of government support for the project. People of all political persuasions were called upon to lend their backing to their growth centre. Liberal Party members sent telegrams calling in political favours. Members of the National Country Party called on their leader and Deputy Prime Minister,
Doug Anthony, to intervene. Labor Party spokesmen were keen to join in the criticisms of the Coalition Government.

A party of the businessmen flew to Launceston to remind Kevin Newman, the responsible federal minister, that private enterprise was heavily committed to what it had been assured was a government project. It would not be possible to win private enterprise support for any similar project in the future, if this one were allowed to fail. Paul Wallace, their spokesman, was quoted in the national newspapers as saying, ‘It is a bloody tragedy that a pilot scheme had to be torpedoed before it’s had a chance to prove itself.’

Just prior to the deadline, the Commonwealth agreed to fund a more modest project, with a population target of 150,000, which was half that originally proposed. The states agreed to make a modest funding contribution. It was agreed that the project might retain the designation of being the ‘National Growth Centre’, but that was now a marketing device rather than a reality. The Commonwealth would provide $5 million, with no requirement of matching state funds. There was an assurance of continuity of funds for Albury-Wodonga over five years beyond 1977-78.

Throughout its campaign, *Border Morning Mail* was critical of Newman and those who advised him, ‘such as the local federal members’. It published a large unflattering photograph of Newman and regarded him as a bête noire. It complained in an editorial headed ‘Border’s Double Disaster’ that the district’s two federal members, Wal Fife in Farrer and Mac Holten in Indi, had shown ‘not the slightest trace of real involvement with the hopes, the aspirations the fears of the people of Albury-Wodonga’. It suggested that Fife, was more interested in bolstering his ministerial ambitions than helping the southern part of his electorate. Those with long memories recalled Fife’s part in
establishing a College of Advanced Education in his home town, Wagga Wagga, rather than Albury.

More recently in his maiden speech in the Commonwealth Parliament, Fife had scorned the rate of progress being made with the Growth Centre. Almost certainly he had encouraged Prime Minister Fraser to make disparaging remarks when he compared rates of growth in Wagga Wagga and Albury-Wodonga.\textsuperscript{xv}

Noting Fife’s inaction on this occasion, Albury City Council resolved to attempt to have their city removed from the Farrer federal electorate, which embraced both Wagga Wagga and Albury. Albury wanted a Member of Parliament with Albury to look after. Fife apologised for his absence from that meeting, and hurried to a specially convened public meeting in Albury to explain the government’s position and to consider the implications of it. This prompted some aldermen to try to carry a rescission motion, but they failed.\textsuperscript{xv}

A month after Fife had suffered the political difficulties associated with having government slash funding from a national project in part of his electorate, he was made Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs, as \textit{Border Morning Mail} had predicted. However uncomfortable Albury City Council was with the electoral boundaries of Farrer, Fife had no real difficulty in retaining his seat in an unaltered electorate at the end of year election. He won with an absolute majority and twice as many votes as his Labor opponent. Nevertheless, Albury won and retained separation from Wagga Wagga when the federal electorate boundaries were redrawn in 1984.

The newspaper plainly disliked Newman and was suspicions of Fife, but its criticisms were usually blunted into a more general lament about political betrayal. It published a double page spread listing and dating ‘Promises, Promises’ and tracking politicians’ statements that the project
was continuing and prospering. Another full-page advertisement listed the announcements of support politicians had made previously. The paper ran editorials critical of government, under headings such as ‘A test case for credibility’, ‘A test case for integrity’, ‘Walking out on a contract’ and ‘A word of little worth’. The $5 million was ‘nothing more than a parting gesture’. On reflection it seemed that, ‘If one lesson is to be learnt, it is that what governments give, they can also take away. There is no substitute for private initiative’.

The 1978 State Election

The sitting member, Gordon Mackie, retired and the seat of Albury was contested by Liberal, National Country and Labor Party candidates in 1978. Phil Williams, the Liberal candidate, had been a party member for three years and had strong support from a well organised local branch. He was in some senses a seasoned campaigner in that he had been Fife’s campaign manager in 1977. Harold Mair, Labor, and Cliff Chamberlain, National Country Party, were, by comparison, party novices, both having been recruited as members in the previous twelve months. Mair, however, had been a hospital board member for twelve years and an alderman for ten years. He had topped the poll in the most recent local government elections. Chamberlain was well-known as a council Community Arts Officer and radio broadcaster. Mair had an active Labor Party branch with trade union support to help him. Chamberlain found there was little branch support. He had no money to spend, and, indeed, he was overseas for two months during the campaign.

Further, Mair had the support of the new popular Premier, Neville Wran. Having won narrowly in 1976, Wran had devoted considerable time and effort to winning additional rural seats. He had encouraged the location of the Australian Newsprint Mill in Albury. He had built a large modern
state office block in the main street. In the dark days for the ‘Growth SOS’ he had dispatched his parliamentary secretary George Paciullio to Albury. Wran had contributed $1 million to secure the on-going Commonwealth financial support. Cabinet Ministers came to Albury to support Mair during the election campaign. In its final electoral eve analysis, the Border Morning Mail said the Wran Government had ‘paid more attention to this seat than any other government since the war’. It wondered if this might be ‘an attempt to buy the seat’. It tipped Wran to win the election.\textsuperscript{xxix}

Mair was a good choice. He proved popular as ‘the battler who [made] good’.\textsuperscript{xx} Although he topped the poll in all four subdivisions, the Coalition candidates won 51 per cent of the vote. Chamberlain had only 2,996 votes, but Mair picked up 20 per cent of his preferences to win by 313 votes and to secure the first victory for Labor in the electorate since 1946. Capitalising on his victory, Mair made a robust inaugural speech venting the displeasure of his constituents at the way in which the Commonwealth was ‘abrogating its responsibilities’ by reducing funds to the Albury-Wodonga Growth Centre project.\textsuperscript{xxi} He had not won the seat as a reward for the part he had played as mayor in the Growth SOS campaign, but that part had shown him to be a feisty local politician ready to fight hard for Albury.

‘Happiness is a tight marginal electorate’

While Mair was member, Albury underwent a transformation. The Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation got into its stride. It developed new residential and industrial sites. New industries and new jobs appeared. Mair secured significant state government spending on public housing, schools, TAFE, an improved Riverina Highway, a new forestry headquarters and a new court
house. He was able to win an increase in the subsidy from the state government for extension of water and sewerage services in Hume Shire, just outside Albury.

Much of this largesse came after 1984 when the Liberal Party saw opportunity to reclaim the seat. Nick Greiner, the new State Opposition Leader, promised an obstetric wing at the Mercy Hospital, more police, and school and road improvements, including a start on a highway bypass by 1988. Wran alleged that Greiner was trying ‘to buy off the electorate’: ‘promises are rolled out like doughnuts from a doughnut machine’. But Wran, too, made promises, proffering school improvements and additional support for local industries and the Albury campus of Riverina College of Advanced Education. He reminded voters that his government had given more than $138 million to the electorate.

Ian Glachan, the Liberal Party candidate, did well in 1984, holding Mair to a majority of 50 per cent. The Liberal Party, at Fife’s instigation, immediately re-endorsed Glachan as the candidate for the next election and started a four-year campaign. Mair was now sixty-five years old and made it clear would did not want to contest the next election in four years time. Glachan seemed to have a good chance of success a second time round, especially when he did so well at the bell-wether booth of West Albury.

In 1987 Greiner declared Albury ‘the most marginal country seat in the state’. His government would build a new $70 million hospital on a greenfields site in Albury. He promised a bypass and a police station at Lavington. ‘Happiness’, the Border Morning Mail observed, ‘is a tight marginal electorate’.
Albury joined the state-wide swing against Labor in 1988. Mair, a reluctant candidate, was still popular, but personal popularity was not enough. His chances of re-election were harmed, not only by the general dissatisfaction with Labor, but by the vigorous local resistance to moves to tighten gun laws. Glachan had an easy win. Together he and McIntosh (National Country Party) won 65 per cent of first preferences. Glachan secured 81 per cent of McIntosh’s preferences to finish with 62 per cent of the total vote.

Save Our Cities

Readers of the *Border Mail* were summoned a second time to save their city, seven years later. In June 1995, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Housing and Regional Development, Brian Howe, announced that the Commonwealth was going to end the growth centre project. It would sell off its assets within five years, hoping to recoup about $100 million from the sale of 15 500 hectares that remained in the substantial land bank. The *Border Mail* was quick to label the proposal a ‘fire sale’ and ‘sell out’. A quick sale of such large a land holding was likely to deflate local property values. The newspaper went into campaign mode, as it had in 1977, urging resistance to the Government’s proposed sale. A full front page editorial brandished the headline ‘Save Our Cities’. Readers were supplied with a cut-out coupon to send to Brian Howe. A series of articles explained how accelerated sale of property might affect local land values. The newspaper gathered and published the concerns of local real estate agents, developers, valuers, farmers and homeowners.
A summit of community leaders met and dispatched a delegation to Canberra to meet with Howe. The meeting was successful in that government softened its line and extended the timeframe in which the sale would take place. It was in the interests of the Commonwealth to ensure that sale of assets did not weaken local property values. The *Border Mail* congratulated itself on its campaign and hailed what it declared a ‘Victory for the People’.

This campaign, like the Growth Centre SOS campaign of 1977, was short and sharp. In itself, the newspaper’s campaign, again like that of 1977, had no direct impact on the political representation of the district. However, it did prompt a similarly named campaign that almost disrupted long settled political patterns in 1999.

**Save Our City**

Albury had been founded as a thoroughfare town. It grew and prospered servicing the needs of travellers. As road traffic increased, town planners moved to divert the Hume Highway, first from the main street, and then from the city itself. An alternative route forming a transport corridor alongside the railway had been fixed on in 1970-71. The Department of Main Roads acquired properties along the route, but no further action was taken when the Growth Centre came into being and planners deliberated on the shape of the new combined city.

During Mair’s term of office Albury pressed for a start on a bypass and a second river crossing. Many people were anxious to improve communication between Albury and Wodonga and saw a second river crossing leading from an internal freeway as a greater local convenience than an
external bypass, which, they argued, would be used by relatively few vehicles. Others worried about creating a physical division of the city by constructing a highway, with all its inconveniences, close to residential areas. As Kevin Esler, the Labor candidate in 1971 had observed, Albury needed a bypass not a ‘hole in the heart’. \textsuperscript{xviii}

Peter Nixon, the Commonwealth Minister with responsibilities for roads, indicated his commitment to an internal bypass in May 1978 well ahead of the state election that year. Mair had unwisely predicted a start on the bypass in his first election campaign, and was baited thereafter by a succession of Liberal candidates.\textsuperscript{xx} The issue gained more attention after Victoria completed a bypass around Wodonga in 1985. One of Greiner’s promises had been to make a start on the bypass if he was elected. The federal land transport Minister, Bob Brown, dismissed that promise as ‘something said in the enthusiasm of an election campaign’.\textsuperscript{xxx} Nixon’s announcement was to be the first of four such ministerial decisions on the proposed route that were proclaimed but not acted on.\textsuperscript{xxi}

By 1990 the Commonwealth Government was well advanced with its plans for the national highway to bypass all the towns between Melbourne and Sydney, including Albury. Bypasses of Yass, Benalla and Wangaratta would be completed by 1994. The Commonwealth announced that work on an external bypass of Albury would start by 1995. At its instigation, the Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW and the Roads Corporation of Victoria commissioned in 1994 an environmental impacts statement/ environmental effects statement for two defined route corridors, one internal and the other external.
Albury City Council was perturbed at the suggestion that an external route might be adopted when it had settled long ago on an internal bypass. It wanted a second river crossing to meet local traffic as well as national highway needs. It was not anxious for ratepayers to assume the costs of maintaining the existing highway while relatively few vehicles might be diverted to an external road. In 1994, council undertook an information campaign to advise residents of the advantages and disadvantages of both routes. Not all residents were pleased with its advocacy of an internal route. Letters to the editor expressing support or opposition to an internal route began to appear more frequently through 1994. They were to continue to flow for the next nine to ten years as the issue played a part in a succession of local, state and federal elections.

The issue created heated arguments. Every resident, it seemed, had a decided view. Neighbours, work and business associates, even families, split into ‘them and us’. Barrackers settled to unswerving football team loyalties. The great bypass debate became an obsession. In Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels factions distinguished themselves by wearing either high or low heeled shoes. In Albury factions did or did not sport a yellow ‘shorter, safer, cheaper’ placard in favour of the external route in their front yards or at their business premises.

There was no clear geographical or other fault line dividing the internal and external route proponents, though plainly residents near the proposed Union Road intersection with the new highway and residents in East and South Albury would bear the brunt of a freeway intrusion. The majority of the city’s elected representatives in council and all of its state and federal parliamentary representatives thought that Albury needed an internal bypass. Governments had agreed on an internal road and to argue for an external would only delay construction. An Albury freeway backbone would foster economic development, and could be built with appropriate environmental
protection. A second river crossing was required to ease local traffic pressures. Albury’s retailers split, with perhaps more thinking they might be better served if the road went through rather than around Albury. An internal road would distinguish Albury from all the other centres on the route that motorists would encounter. They might be enticed to pull off for refreshments or motel stop-overs. The trucking industry and those involved in distribution were sure that the access provided by an internal bypass was preferable to that of an external. The construction industry was impatient to win subcontracts and favoured the internal bypass as providing an earlier start. It suited those in favour of the internal route to characterise external advocates as being principally concerned with the look and feel of the city rather than with how it worked.

It suited those in favour of the external route to characterise the internal advocates as being principally concerned with the city’s economic growth rather than its liveability. The internal route was a short-term rather than a long-term solution to the second river crossing problem. Its proponents did not have the will to insist on a solution that did not harm the urban environment or, indeed, the local economy. A new road was primarily to serve national highway traffic rather than local traffic, and Albury should be no different from any other centre along the route. An internal road carrying heavy highway traffic would physically divide the community. Noise, the likelihood of toxic spills and the fine particles in diesel made it a health risk. The places where local and highway traffic mixed would be dangerous. Further, passing trade need not be lost.

Getting political

The bypass debate moved from the pages of the newspaper into political frames with electioneering at the local government level, first in the council election of 1995 and then that of 1999. The bypass
issue separated candidates at the state elections of 1999 and 2003. Candidates at the federal elections of 1998 and 2001 made their views known, but other national concerns seemed more pressing. Further, the seat of Farrer extended along the state border to Wentworth, diluting interest in an Albury-specific issue. Ironically the decisive election for the choice of route was the federal election of 2001 in which issue was present but peripheral.

In March 1995 the bypass route was debated at the state election campaign with Darren Cameron, a councillor who stood as the Labor candidate, opposing an internal bypass. Albury ignored the state-wide swing to Labor under Bob Carr and, instead, returned Glachan with a 59 per cent two-party preferred majority to sit with the opposition. After the election, Fischer declared the vote as endorsement of the internal freeway, but Glachan was not so sure. The election result does seem to have meant state and federal Labor could see no advantage in pursuing the matter further; given the electorate’s rejection of Labor, Albury had made its choice.

The pro-external bypass cause did better in the local government elections of September 1995. Six of the nine councillors standing again were not re-elected. Four new councillors in favour of the external route were amongst those who replaced them.

As the environmental effects studies was being readied for release and comment, a ‘Save Our City’ group of citizens formed. Its goal was to protect Albury from an internal bypass which would ‘divide our beautiful city’. It organised a rally of 3 000 on Saturday morning in the park in central Albury. An ‘irate’ crowd rally booed and heckled the mayor, Amanda Duncan-Strelec, and federal member, Tim Fischer. To clarify which route people preferred, the newspaper held a poll of its readers. The result was not what the newspaper expected in that 82 per cent of 6 042 responses...
were for the external bypass. *Border Mail* presented its findings in a paragraph on page 2 without comment.

After the environmental impact statements were released, a public inquiry heard submissions. The panel conducting the inquiry recommended adoption of the internal route. Albury City Council had persisted with a pro-internal bypass submission to the public inquiry. However, it agreed to conduct a formal poll at a local government by-election in December 1997. The poll would test if ratepayers agreed with the position council had adopted.

Save Our City campaigned before the poll recruiting for example, the support of sixty health professionals to investigate health issues related to having heavy traffic pass through the city on an internal bypass. It held another well attended central park rally prior to the poll. The poll showed that 13 134 of the 21 000 voters at the by-election (61 per cent) did not support the policy of the City Council in favouring the inner route. The *Border Mail* dismissed the result, for, it argued 28 000 were eligible to vote and that meant less than half the total enrolment had recorded their disagreement with council’s policy.³⁶

In February 1998 the Federal Minister for Transport and Regional Development, Mark Vaile, announced he had accepted the panel’s recommendation to construct the inner route and abandon the outer route. Work began immediately on demolishing houses along the internal route through East Albury.
Boosted by the formal poll result and stirred by the demolition of buildings, the Save Our City group was re-energised. Under Claire Douglas as president and Tom Jensen as vice-president it queried the impact statements and the traffic and cost estimates on which the internal bypass decision had been based. It began to argue for a two-road solution, meeting the needs of local traffic with a road beside the railway to a second river crossing while diverting external highway traffic to an external road and additional crossing. A less conciliatory and fiery breakaway group, ‘Bypass Action Group’, was formed and disrupted a council meeting. More rallies were held. More letters to the editor appeared. More pro-external bypass placards appeared. Talk-back radio and local television featured advocates for one or the other route.

Vivien Voss, the Labor candidate in the federal election at the end of 1998 made it plain she would work for an external bypass. Other issues were considered more important, especially beyond Albury. Indeed it seemed for a time that Tim Fischer might be successfully challenged by Don McKinnon, the Mayor of Wentworth, as a One Nation candidate. Fischer, however, held off all challengers.

As the state election approached in March 1999, both Ian Glachan and Mike O’Donnell, the Labor Party candidate agreed not to turn the contest into bypass debate. They would instead debate more important issues such as job losses and the provision of health services. However, the appearance of Claire Douglas, as an Independent candidate, ensured that the road issue dominated the campaign.

Douglas, with the support of a large number of campaign workers, did well. She argued that the major parties did not heed local needs. More people power was needed. She reminded the
people of Corowa, which had been newly added to the electorate, that it was people power that had saved Corowa from the high temperature incinerator a few years before. Electoral analyst Malcolm Mackerras tipped her to win on Labor preferences. Nervously and without foundation, the *Border Mail* proffered advice to Labor voters that many in the Labor Party believed it was a mistake to give preferences to Douglas, and although they would hand out the official how-to-vote cards, they should advise voters to ignore the stated preferences.

The result was close. Initially the *Sydney Morning Herald* called the election for Douglas. Glachan won with 51 per cent of the vote. He was 3 102 ahead on the first count and 687 ahead after preferences. Douglas won 75 per cent of the ALP preferences, but 2 123 of the Labor votes were exhausted. O’Donnell polled only 18 per cent of the vote, just over half that won by the two previous Labor candidates. Douglas led Glachan at five of the seven Albury booths forcing a tie at one, but failed to out score him at West Albury. Every vote counted and the local Liberal Party machine had done well in mustering pre-poll and postal votes.

The *Border Mail* played an increasingly partisan role in the bypass debate. It published letters presenting both sides, but frequently editorialised and used its columns to support the internal route. Editorially it dismissed the external bypass as a lost cause. Local, state and federal governments had made their decisions. The only way to get a second river crossing in the foreseeable future was to go with an internal route. In the quiet after the 1999 state election the *Border Mail* endeavoured to build some bridges. It opened its pages to a week-long forum inviting both parties to put their cases. There followed a polite airing of views, but no real engagement or debate. Editorial comment seemed fair, but the newspaper was scarcely so in the way it positioned advertisements and selected opinion pieces. Why did it
label pro-internal advocates as ‘influential’? Why did it feature on its front-page stories unflattering to the external bypass cause? Why did newspaper estimates of crowd numbers vary from those who were there? Both sides battled for space and position in the paper. Indeed, some pro-internal advocates were to form a group called ‘Access’ to counter the attention the pro-external advocates were winning. The newspaper was not the only body that could call a local political emergency or issue distress signals.

Internal proponents thought argument was damaging ‘our community inspiration and spirit’. External proponents thought argument was necessary if the voice of the majority was not being heeded. The argument went on beyond the state election.

Claire Douglas and others contested the September 1999 local government election on a pro-external ticket. The Border Mail’s pre-election poll on issues of most importance found that most voters deemed council leadership (81 per cent) and the freeway (71 per cent) were extremely or very important issues. An editorial found this difficult to explain. The route decision had been made and it was time for Albury residents ‘to accept reality’. Voters had the responsibility to cast votes ‘on matters other than the freeway’. Nevertheless, only three of the former councillors were elected. Pro-external councillors numbered again four of the nine positions on council. Douglas topped the poll and was elected Deputy Mayor.

Resolving the dispute
Fischer had announced that he was withdrawing from the front bench and would not contest the next federal election in 2001. John Anderson took the transport portfolio and then Fischer’s leadership of the National Party. Anderson questioned whether the Nationals could retain Farrer if a strong independent candidate stood. He held a review of the bypass costs and decided on a two-road compromise. There would be an external route and an internal boulevard, provided that the states met half the costs of the proposed internal road. Victoria agreed to put in its $35 million contribution, but Carl Scully, the New South Wales Minister, held firmly to the line of his Premier, Bob Carr. In no way would the state devote funds towards a project that should be fully funded by the Commonwealth. An uneasy truce broke out between the warring sides in Albury. The two councils and the principal pressure groups undertook to work together on securing the two-road solution and proceeded to lobby New South Wales for a change of heart. Anderson drove a stake into the ground to mark the external route. The Border Mail claimed the stake was wrongly sited and that was an augury.

At the federal election in November 2001 voters had to choose between John Howard and Kim Beazley to lead the nation, but the candidates for Farrer thought the bypass issues was still worth attention. With Fischer gone, Farrer was open to the Liberal Party to contest. Both coalition candidates Bill Bott (National Party) and Sussan Ley (Liberal Party) were obliged to follow Anderson’s line, even though it seemed to delay work on a bypass until there was agreement between all three governments. Frank Millen (Labor Party) was committed to an external bypass. Unfortunately for him, Martin Ferguson, the Labor Shadow Minister, made it plain during the election campaign that Federal Labor’s policy was for an internal bypass.
Ley and Sophie Panopoulos, the Liberal Party candidate for Indi, went beyond Anderson to urge the Prime Minister, John Howard, to make something happen as soon as possible. They arranged for pro-internal advocates to meet with Howard in Benalla during the election campaign.\textsuperscript{\textit{xiii}}

Bott found his major election difficulty was convincing downstream irrigators that he was supportable given his views on tightening water restrictions. The bypass issue, however, was relevant in that it deflected campaign donations from the National Party to the Liberal Party.\textsuperscript{\textit{xlv}}

Ley won Farrer for the Liberal Party, wresting it from Bott in a close decision that went down to 205 votes on the final count. Panopolous won Indi. Albury-Wodonga now had Liberal Party representatives in the state and federal seats on both sides of the border.

Promises of road funding are sometimes announced as pre-election enticements to hesitant electorates. The Albury-Wodonga decision was more a reward to the faithful. Not long after the election, Howard visited Albury-Wodonga. A closed-door meeting was arranged for him at the offices of Tony Plowman, the Member for Benamabra. The two mayors, the two council executive officers and the district’s state and federal members of parliament attended. It was, the \textit{Border Mail} observed, a meeting not unlike that in which local influential had waited on Brian Howe in 1995, or, it might have added, on Kevin Newman in 1977. Howard promised to give the bypass issue his attention. The meeting, he said, had presented him with a ‘strong and calm case for a somewhat different approach to the issue’.\textsuperscript{\textit{xlv}} In December 2002 Howard announced funding for an internal freeway.

The campaign for the state election in March was already underway. Glachan had announced his resignation. Claire Douglas had agreed to stand again as an Independent. The National Party
decided it would not contest the election, if the Liberal Party would not contest Tweed, which it considered its most winnable seat. This would have left newcomer, Greg Aplin, a former television station manager, as the only coalition candidate. However, Robert Ballard, who had lost Liberal Party preselection to Aplin, stood as an independent. Ballard was a councillor and was well-known as an Olympic and Commonwealth Games competitor. His candidature may have deflected votes from Aplin. It also split the independent vote.

A pre-election poll on issues of importance showed that the Prime Minister’s announcement and argument about cross-border hospital arrangements pushed voters to consider health as the most important issue (43 per cent), well ahead of roads (25 per cent). Another poll, however, suggested Douglas would win. She was not a single issue candidate and was prepared to argue about the best health and education arrangements for the border district. Aplin was already spending heavily on TV and had an advertising blitz in the last week.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Aplin proved a good candidate and had no trouble in winning the seat with 61 per cent of the primary vote against Douglas’ 38 per cent. Yet again the result was hailed as a referendum on the road, but it was the Prime Minister’s intervention rather than the state election that had settled the matter.

As the debate grew to a close, the road itself completed a linguistic transition from Albury’s bypass to Albury-Wodonga’s freeway. The Prime Minister formally opened the $524 million freeway explaining what it meant for the local urban conglomerate as well as highway traffic to eliminate fifteen black spots and rail level crossings. The freeway would bring Albury and Wodonga and the two states more closely together. It was an ‘important piece of infrastructure for Albury-Wodonga
and for the nation’. The Government had provided Albury-Wodonga with a road that was in keeping with the aspirations of any regional city. ‘It provides the people of Albury and Wodonga with a quality freeway and a second Murray River crossing comparable with any road in a major capital city.’

It seemed to the Prime Minister and the proponents of the internal route that Albury-Wodonga had been saved, again. Perhaps, this time, given the numerical strength of the external route advocates, it was saved from itself.

**Conclusion**

There is much about the politicking of electoral campaigns that has remained unchanged over the last thirty years. Candidates have to meet, greet and become known. Harold Mair trawled supermarkets with a minimum of goods in his trolley so as to strike up conversations with other customers. Ian Glachan drove a battered VW on countryside door knocks. Tim Fischer attended as many meetings as possible and became known as ‘two-minute Tim’. Sophie Panopoulos/Mirabella still plies the media with numerous media releases and must have become the person whose photograph appears most frequently in the *Border Mail*.

Supporters still letter-box materials and help address letters to named voters so as to muster postal votes. One of their prime tasks is to attend booths on election day. There is nothing quite so powerful, particularly at small booths, as having a voter greeted by name and with a smile by someone familiar just before voting. Small booths in country districts remain intimate and
sometimes well settled in their ways. In 2003 Walbundrie, with its 182 votes, was among the booths in the state with the highest proportion of Liberal votes. Gerogery (255) and Lowesdale (134) joined it as booths with the lowest Labor vote.\textsuperscript{viii} One apocryphal story has the voters at Cookardinia (60 in 1999) worrying why the Labor vote had increased by one, until it was realised that a recently widowed voter now felt she was no longer obliged to follow her husband’s commitment to the coalition cause.

Nevertheless, the electorate as a whole has increased in size from 26 000 in 1978 to 43 000 in 2003. Even in 1978 campaigns were increasingly organised on a state-wide basis with parties devoting most of their funds to state-wide media. They gave leaders greater prominence and tended to regard local elections as side-events. It was important, for instance, for the state’s electors to know ‘Wran’s our man’.

Money had always been important. Chamberlain had complained in 1978 that he could not match what Labor and the Liberals were spending on advertising. Douglas, as a newcomer and unfamiliar face, used television advertising when Glachan did not in 1999. She outspent Glachan $22 298 to $17 746 in 1999. She spent even more on radio and television in 2003, but perhaps not enough, for successful rural candidates spent, on average twice as much.\textsuperscript{lix} Aplin, in turn, was a new face in 2003 and also turned to television to make himself known. Further, the Liberal Party wanted to ensure that there was not another close call. Aplin ran a lavish last week television blitz. Overall, he spent $101 460 compared with Douglas’ $48 675 and Ballard’s $26 034. Labor was the poor cousin in both elections mustering and spending about $8 000 in each.\textsuperscript{1} Successful electoral campaigns in regional New South Wales in the twenty-first century, it seems, cost not $8 000 nor $50 000, but $100 000.
Candidates were important but much was due to the strength of local party machine. Successful candidates require campaign workers as well as money. There was advantage to the local party in incumbency. All local parties had difficulty in maintaining interest when the member was in opposition rather than government. In Albury the Liberal Party machine drew on a long tradition of wide and enthusiastic support. It remained vigorous supporting a state, if not a federal coalition member in government. It was able to muster sufficient resources to hold off Douglas’ challenges in 1999 and 2003. After 2003 Albury stood at the top of the pendulum of state seats with the largest margin of Liberal votes.

The local Labor Party had more difficulty in retaining branch numbers and supporters. During Mair’s terms, the Trades & Labour Council flourished, stimulated by growth in the manufacturing and public sector unions and by the favours of interviews with visiting Ministers that Mair was able to arrange. It faded away after Glachan was elected. The bypass issue had not been easy for Labor. In 1995 Cameron had supported the internal route. In 1999 O’Donnell tried to ignore the issue and failed. In 2001 Martin Ferguson had undercut Frank Millen’s pro-external stand. State Labor had refused to budge on helping to fund Anderson’s two-road compromise solution. Even the second independent, Ballard, outpolled Mathews who scored a dismal 12 per cent of the primary vote in 2003. On a two-party preferred vote the Liberal Party scored 72 per cent to the Labor Party’s 27 per cent.

The departure of Fischer showed National Party vulnerabilities. The local Liberal Party organisation had supported Fischer as a coalition candidate in his election campaigns after he first won the seat in 1984. Bott had no similar resource to call upon, especially in Albury where the party
had few supporters. He was not helped by the advice given by the *Border Mail* to its readers: they should vote for the coalition, but ‘it won’t matter two hoots who they think is the better party, Liberal or National’.ii

The Albury electorate flirted with independent representation at a time when there was general disillusionment with big parties. The rise of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party is often interpreted as part of a general dissatisfaction with machine politics of the major parties. The *Border Mail* was not alone when it accounted for the One Nation Party’s strong showing in the 1998 federal election as something that ‘happens if the major parties ignore the people too often’. iii In New South Wales there were a record 537 independent nominations in 1999 and 519 in 2003. Some regional cities had independent success stories, notably Tamworth where Tony Windsor won in 1991, 1995 and 1999, before going to the federal parliament. As a result of the 1999 election another two regional cities, Dubbo and Armidale (Northern Tablelands), followed Tamworth and joined two city electorates in preferring independents as members of parliament.

Claire Douglas’ challenges were by no means preposterous. However, during the 1990s, independent lower house candidates in New South Wales had a success rate of only one in twenty, so hers was a struggle. Whereas the primary vote of independents averaged 8 per cent, she scored way above that on both occasions.

The very word ‘politicking’ seems to imply skulduggery. There were many accusations of questionable behaviour and queries about credibility during the bypass debate. Why was Victoria getting so much say on the route through Albury? Had Wodonga’s insistence on continuing its bypass into and through Albury prompted Albury voters to reject the One City proposal in 2002?
How close did proponents of either route, including the politicians, live to the one they rejected?

Had the external options presented been chosen to maximise costs? What were the bases for estimates of construction costs and traffic movements? How exactly had Labor ordered and issued its how-to-vote cards in the 1999 election?

By way of contrast the politicking of the 1978-88 era may have seemed quite gentlemanly. Even then, however, Mair was asked when a start would be made on the bypass he had promised. The Border Morning Mail had expressed disillusionment with politician behaviour. Perhaps, after all, the skulduggery related to the bypass was probably no more than might be expected through a sometimes bitter eight-year debate.

For supporters of Save Our City the results of their efforts must have shown that letters to the editor, demonstrations and petitions were, in the end, effete. A large number of people felt cynical about the political processes involved in over-riding what seemed to be the opinion of the majority in relation to the bypass. Resentments lingered. Some people never gave up. Post-election a group of Concerned Citizens held a well-attended meeting. The group also collected 16 789 signatures to a petition for an external bypass that they gave to Tony Windsor, an independent from New England, rather than Sussan Ley, to present to parliament on their behalf. Concerned Citizens still continue to meet and advise Council on problems associated with the freeway. Local Labor was still insisting in 2005, while the road was under construction, that a future Labor Government should give attention to building an external route.iii Those who supported Save Our City could take consolation that their activities ensured a high quality freeway was built. That, however, was cold comfort in that they had proposed a high quality internal boulevard as well as an external bypass.
For the electorate as a whole there still remains a fond memory of what it was like to be a marginal seat in the mid-1980s. After the close contest in 1999, the *Border Mail* hoped vainly that once again the electorate had become marginal and might more often catch the eye of government. In spite of the Liberal Party triumph celebrated at the opening functions of the freeway, the principal pedestrian bridge that crossed the freeway at the end of the main street was named after the ever-popular Harold Mair.

The distress signals of the Save Our City campaign were no more that shrill rhetorical devices to gather attention. They indicated the power of the press to muster public attention and to wield political influence. The ‘Save Our City’ mimic cry indicated that the community which lent the press the authority to speak on its behalf could also speak for itself. It could push a local issue to the top or near top of the political agendas for candidates to address at all three levels of government.

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Endnotes
The bypass did not seem to be a consideration in the poll conducted by the State Election Office in which Albury and Hume Shire voters rejected a proposal that they form One City with Wodonga in 2002. That poll was a voluntary one.


vii Figures from the 2007 census were not available when this article was prepared.


xxviii *Border Morning Mail*, 3 October 1978.


xxxvi *Border Morning Mail*, 11 February 1971.


xxxviii *Border Mail*, 7 July 1989.

xxxix What follows draws on the bypass issue story told by Howard Jones in ‘Albury-Wodonga Freeway Project’ in *Border Mail Souvenir Magazine*, March 2007. It draws on a series of short interviews with the principal protagonists. A comprehensive archive held by Brian Waters, the last president of the now defunct Save Our City group, awaits detailed analysis.

x ‘Freeway fiasco to fuel family feuds for 100 years’, *Border Mail*, 10 December 1997

xx ‘Freeway fiasco to fuel family feuds for 100 years’, *Border Mail*, 21 May 1991; 23 and 27 March 1995.

xxxv ‘Freeway fiasco to fuel family feuds for 100 years’, *Border Mail*, 1 December and ‘Bypass rally’ 4 December 1995.


xxxix *Border Mail*, 20 March 1999.


xii *Border Mail*, 7-14 August 1999.