

# Not so well-heeled but, ah, the bare feet



Phillip O'Neill

WE'RE doing all right when the uproar in City Hall is the future of fig trees in Laman Street.

Unemployment down, no closures on the horizon, some new investments looking good, signs of spring in the air.

But last week the Australian Bureau of Statistics released figures showing average incomes in the Hunter were considerably lower than those of our Sydney cousins.

Average income in our best local government area, Singleton, barely topped Sydney's median figure.

Our nine other LGAs were below the median.

Our average incomes are like those in Rockdale, Liverpool and Penrith. And they are barely half of those in Woollahra in the eastern suburbs and Hunters Hill and Mosman on the north shore.

The average income in Singleton in 2008-09 was \$55,577 with Muswellbrook just over \$50,000.

Newcastle, Maitland, Upper Hunter, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock were clustered around the \$45,000 mark, with Port Stephens, Dungog and Gloucester trailing.

The interesting thing is that the figures show what an egalitarian place the Hunter Valley is.

The region seems to have an ethic that says enough is enough. Work to cover a modest mortgage, own a car that starts, feed and clothe the kids, and then enjoy life.

And if you're lucky enough to crack it rich, then you're expected to fund the footy team.

The Hunter is a place where a bloke will spend a grand on a surfboard but not on a suit. Where he'll buy two slabs of beer if they're on special, but only one pair of shoes. A gourmet meal is a schnitzel and the tax refund cheque is earmarked for new tyres because there's nothing much wrong with the sofa.

A couple of \$45,000 incomes in a household goes a long way in the Hunter. Recent estimates put the median Newcastle house at \$510,000 and the median unit at \$387,000. Set aside \$600 a week and in 30 years you can own a reasonable home in a rich, safe nation, in a temperate east



RELAXED: What the Hunter lacks in average incomes it makes up for with an egalitarian lifestyle.

coast region, half-an-hour's drive from the world's best beaches.

And your modest house won't come with a down-at-heel postcode. The Hunter has prestige streets rather than prestige neighbourhoods. Saying you live in Merewether or Warners Bay or Maitland, for instance, says little about your likely wealth.

For related reasons, Newcastle's inner suburbs haven't been over-run by gentrifiers. In places like Mayfield and Hamilton, cruise academics, ABC broadcasters and other creative types with designer kitchens live side-by-side with the old working class.

The Hunter Region also provides about 11,500 public housing dwellings, two-thirds of which are in the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie LGAs. But rarely is there a fuss about these concentrations.

Paying your rent to the government rather than a private investor is accepted as a normal, decent way for people to live.

And respect for public housing fend off the interest of developers

in public housing stock astride the beach or in accessible parts of town.

Developers are also kept clear of our camping grounds. Where else in the world does a family pack for summer and drive all of 20 kilometres to stay in barefoot heaven at Redhead or Stockton or Belmont or Wangi Wangi?

Our region isn't poor, and it isn't rich. But it rides the nation's two-speed economy with a foot on each accelerator pedal. It has a diversified services economy, and it has mining, which - love it or loathe it - provides secure, well-paid jobs.

The Hunter also has a history of looking after its small communities. I can't think of an Australian region which protects its small schools like the Hunter does. That's why our small communities continue to flourish, because they have professionally staffed, quality public schools.

The region also hosts two major jails, and the shattered families that gather in their shadows. But again, the region makes no big deal. Behave and you can stay.

Increasingly, and this is new, the region offers the chance to have a go at running your own business which comes with the trend for mining companies and government departments to outsource services and supplies. The construction industry also feeds the growth of small businesses, especially tradies.

At the same time, the region is mindful of the need for strong industrial protection for its workers, a tradition the region seems unlikely to ever discard.

So around the Hunter on any weekend you see kids in parks or in the surf and you can't tell whether they are richer or poorer. The good thing is they don't care. The region remains a place where a kid can become a world champion, or just live a pretty good life, on less than an average Sydney income, and grow old worrying about the fig trees.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.



## Support for store

Merewether residents opposed to a planned Aldi supermarket rallied on Saturday against the proposal, but most online readers weren't so sure it would be a bad thing for the suburb.

Think it's fantastic having an Aldi in Merewether. With the RSL gone, it will add much-needed commercial life to the area. Why shouldn't Merewether have access to cheaper groceries like the rest of Newcastle? Don't listen to the naysayers.

Ashley

Traditionally, council listens to a small minority interest group, more's the pity. There is already some double storey commercial premises in Llewellyn Street already, RSL, Souths and the church.

time for a bex

An Aldi in Merewether would bring jobs and provide a supermarket within walking distance for many of the local residents. It only operates during normal business hours and is not a noisy or offensive type of operation. Why would anyone oppose it?

johnno

All power to the group opposing this unnecessary and unwanted development. The imposition of ugly supermarket barns on the city's suburbs must stop and the council focus all future redevelopment exclusively on Hunter Street and our city centre.

Hank Williams

Build a David Jones in Merewether it will be warmly accepted. Aldi is too much of a "lower class" retailer for the suburb.

Newcastle Bogan

Why would you oppose! Wish I had an Aldi supermarket near my neighbourhood!

Sam M

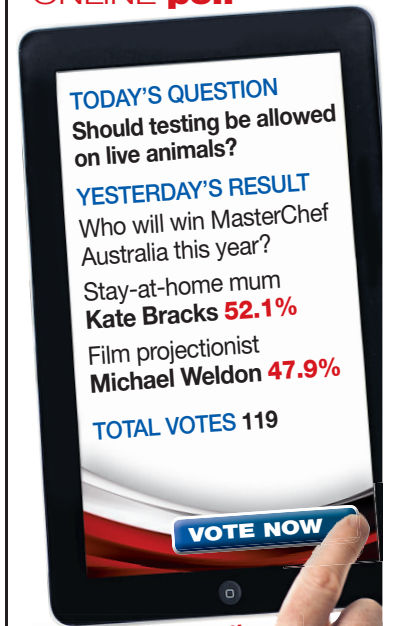
Why does the city of Newcastle need another shopping centre? Is the council just hell bent on killing off all the local business owners?

LSDJ

Aldi is good for retail competition. Build it. Don't believe the pouting.

terry

## ONLINE poll



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# Census can help build strong communities

Statistics are crucial - if we act on them to make Australia a better place, writes Elizabeth Baker.

IT'S Census time. Tomorrow night Australians will record information about themselves, their families and their homes.

This data collection that happens every five years is crucial to communities and our community services. It's always interesting to see what the new trends are, following the Census results.

Are there new education or employment patterns? Have wages on average increased, decreased or stabilised? What does the family unit look like in today's society? How much of Australia has come online in the past five years?

The Census is a voice for people in Australia, an opportunity to be counted, and as the Census tagline suggests, "shed some light" on the way we live as well as the infrastructure and services we might need for the future.

To make sure everyone's voice is heard, this year special attempts are being made to connect with people who are sleeping rough or homeless, people in jail, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and young people.

It is essential that these community groups are connected with and invited to share information that will contribute to Australia's future.

The data should paint a picture of the real Australia, not just highlight the majority.

Census might gather some of this information but will we, as a community, listen?

If the results identify gaps, will government policies change to fill them? If the gaps aren't filled, will community groups step up and be able to assist?

The Census asks questions about our individual circumstances and families, but collectively these people and families combine to create a community, and it is together that we must work to allow everyone to have a voice that can be heard.

Whether it is Census time or not we must ensure we are taking the time to look at what is happening around us and listen to others so that we can build our capacity to grow and strengthen our communities.

Community has been defined as a group of people with a shared identity.

It is what we share that brings us together but within this group, our

differences should also be celebrated. It is often these differences and the variety of people in each community that provide unique gifts and opportunities for development and growth.

The differences and development should be encouraged as we all share our individual voices that join to form a choir of community.

Let us acknowledge the individual voices and new trends the Census results identify but, most importantly, let us act on the learnings in order to create strong, inclusive communities around Australia.

Elizabeth Baker is the communications manager at the Samaritans Foundation. Article submitted by the Churches Media Association.