Support our suburban optimists

South-west Sydney is a complex place – a patchwork of cultures, languages, ethnicities, religions, income status and personal histories. It stretches along the truck-congested Hume Highway, from Bankstown through Liverpool to Campbelltown, and to the newer suburbs of Camden. Erroneous perceptions of south-west Sydney abound, and are reinforced to the marginalised youth depicted in films such as Cedar Boys, Little Fish and Idiot Box. Locals across the socio-economic spectrum suffer from stereotypes and misconceptions.

The “aspirational” – though I hesitate to use the term in the post-Howard era – have come in for their own drubbing. It is not their choice of home – the McMansion – it is their propensity to live in secured (but not gated) estates in outer suburbs, or their car dependency. It is a dependency made necessary mainly by extremely limited public transport that does not support the needs of industrial suburban families.

Incongruously, the aspirational are also derided for trying to mirror the lifestyles of higher status suburbs. So they’re labelled materialistic. Perhaps we need to call them suburban optimists. These households are self-starters; hard-working with ambition. With a low completion rate in the Higher School Certificate among the over-30s, many of them are blue-collar contractors and small business operators who work long hours. They are hypersensitive to the vagaries of the global and domestic economies.

Others are white-collar workers, drawing on two middling incomes and coping with an income-rich/time-poor equation that is difficult to square. These households value a hard day’s work; a value they hope to pass onto their children. They also value security, self-reliance, a normative version of family, and the notion of community that shares similar values, beliefs and lifestyles to themselves. It is hardly surprising that low-cost independent schools are flourishing across the region.

Parents spend time encouraging their children to become good local citizens. At my child’s primary school in Prestons, parents may not talk politics but their kids do. They talk elections, hung parliaments and the religious beliefs of party leaders.

They can also explain the link between obesity and diabetes, and they worry about climate change and poverty in Africa. Competitive education in the era of National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, or Naplan, will ensure that this cohort will complete more years of formal education than their parents, and many will go on to university.

Interestingly, many parents do not believe a university education is vital for a successful life. Ask the mothers of nine- and ten-year-olds what aspirations they hold for their children, and they will invariably answer to be “confident”, “self-sufficient” and “happy within themselves”. Rarely do they mention having a “successful career” or “building wealth”. Quite unwittingly, existentialist concerns hold greater relevance for these parents than more materialistic notions of financial wealth or professional success. They defy the stereotype.

For these mothers, the benefit of a university education is the hope that their children can be employed nine-to-five, rather than have to cope with the vagaries of running their own business like they and their husbands have had to do. Again, they defy a stereotype, this time of the rugged individualist.

Let’s hear what our western suburbs can support such ambition. What is needed, however, is a shift in outsider perceptions. Today’s children of south-west Sydney require employment opportunities and government services that other Sydneysiders take for granted.

City-centric railway lines are useful, but not the only answer to local employment needs (and if these are built, there needs to be enough train services and station car parking to make them viable.) VET courses and traineeships have their place, but the future lies with the diversification of our local economies. Small white and blue-collar businesses continue to be important.

Much of the south-west has been developed by these sorts of businesses and the entrepreneurial folk that lead them. They are not, however, and should not be the only future for the present population, let alone for the 300,000 residents that the region is expected to accommodate over the next 20 years.

What south-west Sydney needs is private and public investment in complex business systems that capitalise on the existing infrastructure and untapped talent, such as the University of Western Sydney’s medical and law schools on the Campbelltown campus, which are designed to engage with local businesses and government services to develop local expertise and services. These university courses were established to keep our talent in the region. Not every lawyer has to live in the eastern suburbs, nor every doctor on the north shore.

South-west Sydney has the talent and capacity (albeit somewhat latent) to look after itself but lacks the infrastructure and the will of outsiders to see it through.

What the area also needs is a lot less rezoning of vast tracts of industrial land, which turns precious green fields into cheap, mass warehouse and storage facilities that serve more affluent suburbs. These facilities are not mass employment opportunities. They require only a handful of relatively low-skilled computer workers.

Governments, policy makers and developers need to recognise that the era of intense industrial employment is over. It was overwell before the state government began developing its large, concentrated public housing estates in Campbelltown from the late 1970s.

These estates were intended to provide a local workforce for Fordist-type industries that failed to eventuate. This is a history long forgotten, so residents of these unsalvageable estates continue to be disparaged for their seeming lack of nous and high unemployment levels.

Finally, we need to value, care and support our young people, and not hinder their progress with stereotypes and misconceptions. A new suburban paradigm of belief, engagement and
expectation is required to ensure our young people’s capacity and abilities are revealed, not only to themselves but to the wider populace of Sydney.

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