

NEW SOUTH WALES COMMITTEE ON LAND USE DATA

COMPUTERISED LAND USE DATA - MARK II

March 1983

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MONDAY, 7 MARCH 1983

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The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby, C.M.G.*
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

URPIS REVISITED

In December 1982, addressing the URPIS conference I called attention to the need for a new national initiative on computerised land use data.¹ I referred to the urgency of the problem and drew an analogy between the uncontrolled development of railways in the 19th Century with different gauges: a problem that still remains to haunt us as we approach the 21st Century in Australia. It is my conviction that unless there is a national resolve to prevent the same thing happening, it will recur as local government authorities and State instrumentalities move towards their own systems of land use data. New South Wales has its own committee of interdepartmental officials. In Queensland, there is the Land Data Bank Committee also made up of officials and about to report. Preliminary steps have already been taken in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia, each adopting approaches without special attention to the need for compatibility throughout the country. I understand that the Queensland report will propose the provision of a centralised data base in Queensland limited to administrative data, i.e. not providing special data, though this may come later. Local authorities having their own land data are already moving towards computerisation. Naturally, they want the economies of a computerised land data system which ties in with their particular administrative systems. But these are often special and idiosyncratic. At this stage, before the advance of specialised and local computerisation in land data in Australia goes too far, what we need is the design of an integrated administrative land data system which can take into account the aggregate needs of national, State and local authorities. It seems to me that we need to go beyond the mere collection of administrative data and to ensure that a system is set in place in a way that can receive data on the whole range of services presently supplied to land in our continental country.

My particular concern is that what is now happening, by a process of unplanned natural evolution, without due national planning, is the introduction of specialised computer systems that are not or are not readily compatible. Steps have been taken by the National Mapping Council to secure certain common measurements and like features, but that Council has not interested itself in land use data itself. Its interests have lain elsewhere, particularly in mapping of resources.

A proposal has been developed by a private organisation for a computerised land administration and information mapping system for Australia. The purpose of this proposal is to develop programs which local authorities could tap into and which could provide a proper measure of uniformity throughout the nation especially in relevant computer software. In the States there are local statutes such as the Queensland Survey Co-ordination Act which is available to permit State authorities to impose a common system on local government authorities. However, State Governments, themselves short of funds, are not inclined to enforce such provisions, particularly in default of a national agreed approach.

NEED FOR A NATIONAL APPROACH

Whether the private proposal is or is not successful, the need for a national approach is plain. What we need is a study with appropriate attention to costs and benefits and one specific to Australia's special needs. Unless we have this, overseas systems will be imported. These systems have generally been designed for the very different historical, geographical and size factors of England and are not necessarily appropriate to Australia. Millions of dollars are presently being spent by local government authorities. Brisbane City Council alone is setting up a computerised land data system costing \$750,000 to instal. Once these investments are made, it is difficult to change computerised systems because of the costs involved. Unless we can get uniformity now, the cause of nationally compatible computerised land use information systems will probably be set back for decades.

State Governments do not appear ready or able to give the lead here. It may be hoped that the Commonwealth, which has legitimate national interests in seeing that there is an efficient use of our resources will give a lead. The Landsat program or the National Mapping Council may provide possible vehicles for a heightened Commonwealth co-ordinating role. This is not to propose interference by the Commonwealth in the traditional State concerns of land use. The overwhelming involvement of State and local government in land use data is not in question. It is simply a matter of co-ordinating what would otherwise be unco-ordinated as every local government authority in Australia moves separately and independently towards computerisation of its land use data.

Railway incompatibility stand before us in Australia as a warning. It is unhappily typical of the unsatisfactory state of the law that the prospectus for the private project I have mentioned was initially refused financial support by the Australian Industrial Research and Development Incentives Board because it was claimed a computer software program is outside the ambit of a 'product', which may be supported by the Board.

Our laws and attitudes predate the computer age. It is vital that both our laws and our attitudes should be updated. In some ways, changing the laws (hard as that is) may be easier than changing attitudes because of the professional jealousies and narrowmindedness that sometime prevent efficient co-operation for the benefit of the whole country. Let us hope that laws and attitudes will submit to rational modernisation and reform as we proceed with the inevitable computerisation of land use data in Australia.

FOOTNOTES

- * Views expressed are personal views only.
- 1. See M.D. Kirby, 'Computers: Who Is Concerned?', URPIS 10 Conference, 1 December 1982, mimeo.
- 2. J W Overall, Report of the Inquiry on the Proposal to Establish a System of Survey Integration in New South Wales, August 1974, mimeo. See also University of New South Wales, School of Survey, Proceedings on Land Information Systems for State and Local Government Seminar, Sydney, November 1982, mimeo.