As cities grow, parts of regional Australia disappear and get angry

By Shane Wright and Eryk Bagshaw
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Rural and remote parts of the country have shed up to a third of their population and turned away from the major political parties, new figures show, despite Australia adding 2.3 million residents over the past six years.

An analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures, released on Thursday, shows despite strong population growth across every major city since 2012, many parts of the country lost thousands of people as the mining and agricultural sectors deteriorated.

The combined populations of the nation's capitals grew by 1.8 million between 2012 and 2018, with Melbourne alone adding almost 700,000 residents while Sydney swelled by 553,000.

But over the same period, 31 per cent of the population of the old West Australian mining area of Meekatharra disappeared, while on the Gulf of Carpentaria almost 28 per cent of Nhulunbuy's 4520 residents left.

Stubbornly high levels of unemployment, limited educational opportunities and a growing technological divide have driven younger residents in particular away from outlying areas towards the cities. At this year's federal election, many of these communities showed their frustration with the lack of economic opportunity by punishing the major political parties at the ballot box.

University of Queensland political expert Chris Salisbury said many rural and remote areas were seeking political alternatives as younger people grew frustrated and left and remaining residents aged.

"The major parties are not seen to be providing the answers and these answers are largely economic," he said. "It's economically driven migration and economically driven desperation to give support to other political actors."
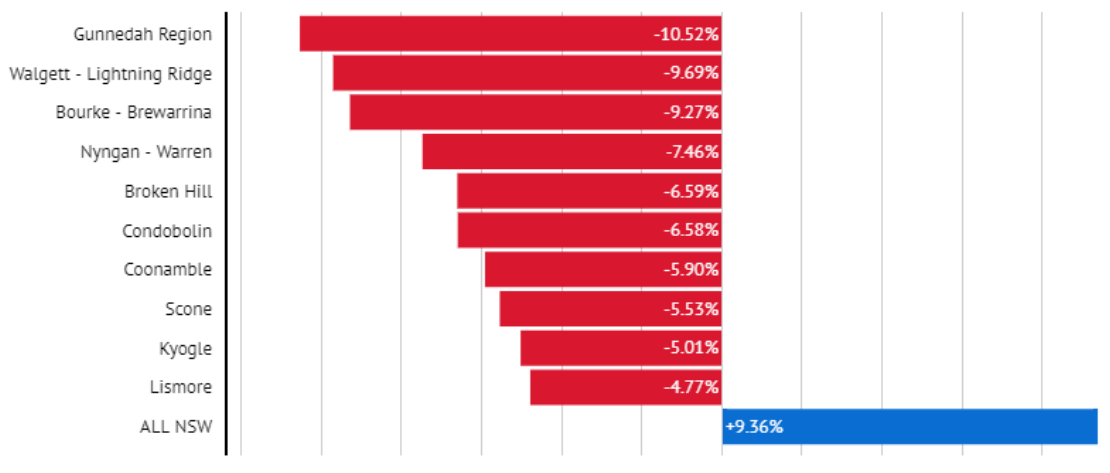
NSW

The ABS figures show despite NSW's strong overall growth, parts of the state have de-populated.

Since 2012, the outback town of Broken Hill has lost 6.6 per cent of its population, or 1239 people. Almost 140 of those left in the past 12 months, taking its total population down to 17,734.

Across the far west of the state, populations are falling. The Bourke-Brewarrina population is down by 9.3 per cent since 2012, the Walgett-Lightning Ridge population has fallen by 9.7 per cent while Nyngan-Warren has lost 5.6 per cent of its residents.

Regional population change - NSW

SA2 areas - Change % 2012-2018

Region	Change
Gunnedah Region	-10.52%
Walgett - Lightning Ridge	-9.69%
Bourke - Brewarrina	-9.27%
Nyngan - Warren	-7.46%
Broken Hill	-6.59%
Condobolin	-6.58%
Coonamble	-5.90%
Scone	-5.53%
Kyogle	-5.01%
Lismore	-4.77%
ALL NSW	+9.36%

Source: ABS

The largest single drop of a major population centre was the central west region of Gunnedah, where the population fell 10.5 per cent in six years to stand just above 4000.

In Broken Hill, a traditional Labor stronghold, one in every four votes went to a Liberal Democrat, independent or United Australia Party candidate at this year's federal election.
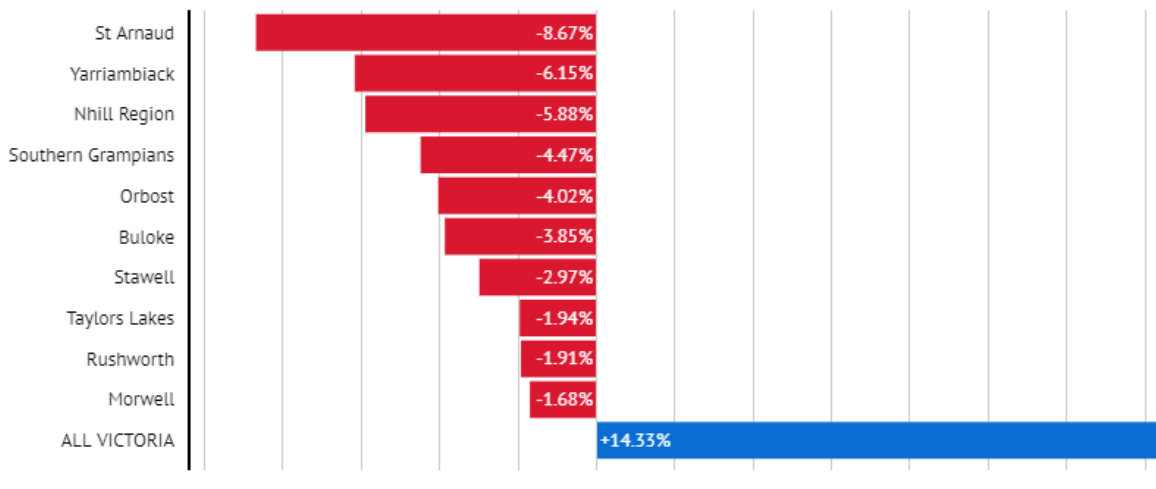
The population of the town of Corowa, near the NSW border with Victoria, fell more than 4 per cent over the period. At this year's election, independent Kevin Mack gained one in every five votes cast while sitting member Sussan Ley suffered a 12-point drop in her primary vote.

VICTORIA

Between 2012 and 2018, Victoria added more than 800,000 residents, with its total population growing by 14.3 per cent to 6.5 million. But most of that growth was in Melbourne and its suburbs. Melbourne's CBD population surged by the most of any capital in the country, effectively doubling to almost 50,000.

Regional population change - Victoria

SA2 areas - Change % 2012-2018

Region	Change
St Arnaud	-8.67%
Yarriambiack	-6.15%
Nhill Region	-5.88%
Southern Grampians	-4.47%
Orbost	-4.02%
Buloke	-3.85%
Stawell	-2.97%
Taylors Lakes	-1.94%
Rushworth	-1.91%
Morwell	-1.68%
ALL VICTORIA	+14.33%

Source: ABS

But 250 kilometres to the west in the Wimmera community of St Arnaud, the population fell 8.3 per cent to fewer than 3300. Other Wimmera areas, including Warracknabeal (down 6.2 per cent) and Nhill (down 5.9 per cent), also registered major drops. To the north, the regional population of Swan Hill has fallen by 5.1 per cent.

At this year's federal election, a decline in support for the major parties followed de-population. Each community sits in the seat of Mallee, where a huge field of candidates ran, including independent Ray Kingston, who took 16 per cent of the vote in the Nationals' stronghold of St Arnaud.

In the state's east, the population of Orbost has fallen by 4 per cent over the past six years. At this year's election, Labor's primary vote lifted by 5.7 per cent while the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers' candidate, David Snelling, nabbed 7 per cent of the vote.

QUEENSLAND

Between 2012 and 2018, Queensland added 442,000 residents, but most of that growth was in Brisbane's suburbs such as Sheldon (up 24 per cent), Eagle Farm-Pinkenba (183 per cent) and Taigum-Fitzgibbon (42 per cent).

Outside Brisbane, populations in some of the state's key centres are shrinking. North Mackay's population has dropped by 14.3 per cent since 2012, while the city's south has contracted by 13.4 per cent. The number of people in the Barcaldine-Blackall area has fallen by 14 per cent, or almost 800, while the population of Longreach has slipped 16.3 per cent and Mt Isa's is down 12.9 per cent to 18,588.

At this year's federal election, support for the major parties fell in all these communities. Across Mackay, in the seat of Dawson, One Nation picked up almost 14 per cent of the primary vote while the United Australia Party also polled well. In the Rockhampton suburb of Berserker, where the population has fallen 9 per cent, One Nation's Wade Rothery polled more than 22 per cent of the vote.

Co-chief executive of the Rural Australia Institute, Kim Holland, said while populations in some rural and remote areas were falling, job vacancies were actually increasing.

"It is something really unusual, something we never see because normally people move to the jobs but at the moment that's not happening," he said. "It might be a liveability issue with people not prepared to move to some of these places."