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Call to move key services inland

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INLAND provincial cities such as Albury-Wodonga, Wagga Wagga, Tamworth and Toowoomba are unlikely to become the major cities of the future without a radical decentralisation of government, one expert says.

Governments should consider shifting key departments to large regional cities to foster growth and encourage population spread, the University of Southern Queensland's Geoff Cockfield said yesterday.

Speaking to *The Australian* at the Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia conference in Townsville, Dr Cockfield said unless governments made "radical and serious" changes, the inland provincial cities of today would never catch up to fast-growing, high-density metropolitan and coastal areas.

Dr Cockfield said Australia was "hollowing out", with most people living in the capital cities and coastal areas.

"Wealth, economic decision-making, educational attainment and political representation are concentrated in the cities and particularly the inner-metropolitan areas," he said.

He said unless the government made structural changes, the three high-growth metropolises of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne would continue to streak ahead of the inland provincial cities. If government departments shifted to the inland provincial cities, he said, so too would employees, their families and associated services, boosting growth. He said cities such as Toowoomba, in southern Queensland, with a population of about 120,000, could grow to more than 200,000 people. Dr Cockfield said large universities could also move inland to create dedicated university towns.

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