

Capital's growth takes it to the top

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SO much for the weather jokes and indelicate references to Bleak City — Melbourne is on track to elbow aside Sydney as Australia's largest city.

Research led by demographer Bernard Salt shows Melbourne has shrugged off a once-winty, woebegone image to decisively outpace its arch-rival in population growth.

The Victorian capital added 62,306 residents in the 12 months to June last year — nearly twice the population Sydney gained — and by Mr Salt's reckoning, Melbourne will become the nation's biggest city in 2028 if the trend continues.

Australians' love affair with inner-city living is also taking off, and for the first time the number of people moving downtown rivalled those shifting to traditional growth belts in the suburbs and on the urban fringes.

Melbourne restaurant manager Monique Moussi rented out her home in Seddon, on the city's edge, in favour of a fast-paced and closely networked lifestyle in the fashionable Docklands precinct near the city's heart.

She's far too busy running the family restaurant, Medici's, to maintain a house and garden, and loves the sense of community inner-city living offers. "You can live in suburbia and just not know

your neighbours at all," said Ms Moussi, 28. "I've made a lot of friends here. The community is really close — a lot of the regular clients have become our friends."

Ms Moussi is part of a nationwide shift towards inner-city living — driven largely by young people and empty-nesters — that is recasting the urban landscape.

Melbourne's population of 3.74 million is still 500,000 adrift of Sydney's but the city is fast closing the gap, Mr Salt finds in the latest of his well-regarded population growth reports, to be released today. The prediction would jolt Brisbane's hopes of supplanting Melbourne as the nation's second city.

The turnaround in Melbourne could be attributed to Sydney slumping into a post-2000 "Olympic depression", said Mr Salt, a partner in consultancy KPMG and a regular contributor to this newspaper.

His predictions give Melbourne hope it could return to its 19th-century status as Australia's largest and most important city, lost to Sydney during the early decades of the 20th century.

Melbourne served as Australia's capital, from Federation in 1901 until parliament was relocated to Canberra in 1927.

"Whatever it is, Melbourne is busy closing the population gap on Australia's glamour city," Mr Salt said.

Sydney's relatively slower pop-

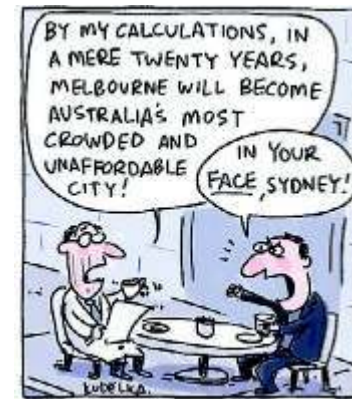
ulation growth — 0.9 per cent to Melbourne's 1.7 per cent — was most acute on its outskirts, where former nappy valleys such as Campbelltown were shedding population as the kids grew up and moved to the city.

While central Sydney's population was up by 6800, Campbelltown, on the city's southwestern limits, lost 815 residents. Melbourne gained 7000 inner-city dwellers and Brisbane 6300.

Underlining the trend to CBD living in those cities, population density in inner Sydney was three times that of central Perth which, riding the West Australian mining boom, recorded the fastest overall growth of the capitals.

The Gold Coast attracted an additional 17,374 residents, push

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Face of a trend: Restaurant manager Monique Moussi loves inner-city living in Melbourne's fashionable Docklands precinct

Picture: David Gaughy

Melbourne tops growth list

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ing its population past the 500,000 mark, and cementing its place as the country's fastest growing locality.

Sleepy Adelaide came alive, adding 11,542 residents, nearly double its usual population increase.

Australians continued to opt for a sea or tree change in lifestyle, with seven of the nation's fastest growing towns dotted along the Queensland coast, led by the retirement

haven of Hervey Bay, 300km north of Brisbane.

The Bryant family traded the hurly burly of city living to move to a 3000sq m property at Mt Barker in the Adelaide Hills.

The 35-minute commute to the city is a small inconvenience for David Bryant, a 33-year-old chemical engineer, while wife Karen has her hands full at home with Jessica, 4, Hayley, 2, and 10-week-old Kayla.

"I grew up on a farm and I just love the open space," said Ms Bryant, also 33.