
Why Australia Needs a Sustainable Population Policy

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Australia urgently needs to develop a sustainable population policy. There is strong evidence that if we let our population keep growing as fast as it is doing now (about 2% a year) our quality of life in Australia is likely to decline.

Australia's population will reach 42 million by 2050, six million more than the Federal government's 2010 Intergenerational Report's projection, if migration, fertility and life expectancy continue at today's pace. Accelerated population growth in Australia in recent years is due to policy decisions by the Federal government, with the Prime Minister claiming to be a strong supporter of a "big Australia". While these actions may bring some short-term economic gains, they are not in fact in the public interest and represent mainly narrow, vested business interests, according to Mark O'Connor and William Lines (see Recommended Resources).

Serious questions have been raised about the long-term economic costs of such rapid population growth. Indeed Ken Henry, the Secretary to the Treasury, questioned how well the infrastructure in Australia will cope with the influx of people in his March 2010 address to the Conference on the Economics of Infrastructure. Dr Deborah Pelsler in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (online; April 2010) wrote that it is likely that substantially higher Federal and state taxes will be needed to pay for the infrastructure needed to provide health, energy, transport and food for such a

growing population.

Pelsler and other commentators also warn about the effects that a larger Australian population may have on public health and on Australia's environments. The Australian public is now becoming aware of some of these consequences, with recent polls indicating that over 70% of Australians are concerned about rapid population growth, particularly as it is likely to be associated with declining living standards, increased traffic jams, power blackouts, water restrictions, unaffordable housing, environmental destruction, urban crowding, reduced service delivery and falling health status.

Warnings given over 40 years ago by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* about environmental pollution, followed by a host of writings in the 1970s about overpopulation by concerned scientists including Professor Barry Commoner, produced too little political action. With environmental catastrophes looming, it is clearly necessary for politicians at Federal, state and local level to demonstrate leadership in this important area. There is now a need for a new breed of enlightened MPs, and it is encouraging to see some politicians showing leadership in this area.

Issues Requiring a Sustainable Population Policy

Climate Change and Global Warming

International concerns about climate change/global warming have led to much publicity and political talk but little tangible action. Doubt about global warming has been instigated by economic rationalists who claim it is part of a “natural cycle”.

Regardless of whether it is caused by humans or part of a natural cycle, evidence of global warming is a wake-up call for the world and Australia. It reminds us that changes to environments can be devastating and irreversible.

Many experts consider that curbing population growth is the single most important thing humans can do to reduce global warming. A recent study by the London School of Economics showed that money spent on offering birth control saved more than four times as much greenhouse emissions as the same amount spent on other remedies.

Limited Arable Land

Many proponents of population growth perpetuate the myth that Australia has enormous tracts of land that can accommodate a large, sustainable population. However, Australia is largely arid, its soils nutrient-poor and its rainfall inconsistent.

Over half the continent is already grazed, and in much of it soils are rapidly degrading, eroding or becoming salty. Only about 6% of Australian land is arable (suitable for crops) compared with 20% in the US. Out of this 6% it is estimated that 17 million hectares will be destroyed by salinity within 50 years.

Population growth increases the demand for food. The most productive land is already in use, and we are under pressure to make it more productive. In more marginal regions, like the edges of the wheat belts, poor harvests and higher costs lead many poor farmers to migrate to cities to look for work.

At the same time, expanding cities build over the surrounding patches of fertile land that were once their food bowl, pushing food production further away from consumers and

increasing food miles. This increases the cost of all the activities associated with producing and transporting food, and means that the millions crowded into our cities have no way to feed themselves in an emergency.

Waste Production

Compared with OECD countries, Australia has a very poor environmental record. It produces almost 2% of the world's greenhouse gases. Per capita, Australians emit about 26 tonnes of CO₂ each year, the highest in the developed world. By contrast in Britain and most of Europe the average is 10 or 11 tonnes, in China 4 tonnes, and in India just 2 tonnes. Note that immigration to Australia can greatly increase a person's emissions. As well, our annual production of solid waste is over 618 kg per capita compared with the OECD average of 513 kg. Even with austere resource-use policies, Australians are likely to maintain this high rate of consumption, which is made worse by high population growth (see O'Connor and Lines, Recommended Resources).

Services

In most Australian cities, the infrastructure cannot cope with the populations it serves. This is true of schools and colleges, roads and transport systems, hospitals and health care, housing supply, water, power and gas utilities, and other amenities.

Current population growth rates push the demands for these services well beyond the capacity for governments to fund them. The result is declining quality and availability. Disadvantaged groups in the community are most affected by this, says Pelsler.

Jane O'Sullivan of The University of Queensland points out that infrastructure lasts on average 50 years, so about 2% of it needs to be replaced each year. That's with a stable population. But if population is growing by 2% per year (as it was in 2009–10) we need an extra 2% of new infrastructure, which doubles the cost. This is probably more money than any government can extract from taxpayers, which explains why infrastructure is so inadequate in areas where population is growing fast.

Note that the same thing is true of trained professionals like doctors and nurses. If population grows at 2% per year, we need to graduate twice as many of them each year –

unless we “pirate” them as immigrants from developing countries, which seems unfair.

Traffic Congestion

The 2005 Federal government report *Health Impacts of Transport Emissions in Australia: Economic Costs* assumes there will be at least 10% more people in Australian cities in the next 10 years. It says this will increase passengers on public transport by 18%, road freight by 32%, and traffic congestion by 58–69% in Perth. It estimated that the avoidable cost of this congestion in Australia was \$9.4 billion in 2005, but would more than double to \$20.4 billion in 2020. In the same 10 years, says the report, the carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions from traffic are expected to grow by 22.6%.

Housing Affordability

In just 8 years between 2000 and 2008, house prices increased by more than 50%, even allowing for inflation. Rents also increased greatly. Hence an increasing proportion of

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Australians could simply not afford to have their own home, according to the *State of Australian Cities* report released by the Federal government in 2010.

Skyrocketing house prices are driven largely by population growth. (There is no such problem in those country towns where population is stable or

falling.) The National Housing Supply Council estimated this year that there is currently a shortfall in supply of 178,400 dwellings in Australia. The Council suggests that this deficit will rise to 640,000 dwellings by 2029. This will further inflate the price of homes, as well as increase crowding, especially for low income groups.

Mental Health

Rapid growth, increasing urbanisation and crowding are significant contributors to stress say Clive Hamilton and Elizabeth Mail in a 2003 discussion paper for the Australia Institute. Such crowding increases the risk of

developing schizophrenia, says a 2009 *Lancet* paper by Professor Jim Van Os and Professor Shitij Kapur. A growing research base shows that contact with the natural world provides social, health and psychological benefits, but these benefits are becoming harder to acquire as we move to more pressured patterns of city living. This has a particularly bad effect on the physical health of children, poorer families, and other vulnerable groups.

Other Health Issues

Population growth means that more of us live in cities, and larger cities. This is associated with higher rates of obesity and asthma, according to Professor Bruce Armstrong and colleagues (*Medical Journal of Australia*; online, November 2007). The increasing percentage of overweight and obese people is associated with people taking less physical activity, which in turn is linked to urban sprawl caused by rapid population growth. Asthma triggered by vehicle exhausts is also expected to rise.

Aged Care Services

Pelser estimates that approximately 25% of Australians will be older than 65 years by 2056. One of the arguments for the current policy of rapid population growth is that it will keep Australia “younger”. However, demographers agree that even the high levels of net migration envisaged in the 2010 Intergenerational Report will make little difference.

According to Professor Peter McDonald of the Australian National University, if we reduce net migration to zero then our population would grow from 22.3 million in May 2010 to only 23.1 million in the year 2054, but 27% of our population would be aged 65 or over. By contrast, if we keep net migration at around 180,000 our population will rise to over 36 million, and we would still have 22% of people over 65. The difference in population size is much greater than the difference in the proportion of the elderly and the increase in people too old to work is countered by a decrease in those too young to work. In general the young cost the taxpayer far more than the elderly, who have often already saved up to pay for their retirement. Most young people are unable to work until they have completed their studies, whereas many people supposedly past retirement age continue to do very useful work.

However, Australian health services will have to deal with a much larger number of people with disabilities of old age or with the chronic diseases caused by unhealthy crowded environments. Recent reports by Pelsler and the Australian Medical Association indicate that health systems throughout Australia are already struggling to cope with the current population of 22.3 million people, and that investment in addressing the problem is falling well behind what is needed. Once again, population growth adds to the problem of paying for “infrastructure”.

A Policy on Sustainable Population

The Public Health Association of Australia has recognised the public health implications of rapid population growth and has developed a new policy on sustainable population (www.pha.net.au). The policy contends that it is unlikely that we can take effective measures against climate change without stabilising our population. It also states that “Australia’s population could be stabilized readily, with little additional growth, through changes in public policy without coercive or punitive measures against any current behaviours”. The policy recommends that the Federal government should immediately commission an inquiry into Australia’s population policy options. It says this report should consider some important changes:

- Investigate policies that contribute to a sustainable population.
- Investigate the potential impacts of withdrawing the “baby-bonus” and reallocating these funds to child welfare and to programs to help people avoid unintended pregnancies.
- Recommend more money both to train Australian school-leavers in scarce work skills, and also to do the same for people in developing countries in our region.
- Help to improve workforce participation and access to training affecting disadvantaged sectors of the community, including flexible work arrangements, relocation and transitions between welfare and work.
- Increase international aid for voluntary family planning and reproductive health

services, and for improving educational access for women.

- Include assessment of fertility and barriers to family planning access in each program, and prioritise unmet need for family planning in each aid program.
- Increase Australia’s target for greenhouse pollution reduction based on revised population data.

Population Planning

It is critical that all our Federal and state governments develop sustainable population plans with stabilisation of population growth as an option. The plans must also ensure that the already vulnerable members of our communities (indigenous people, pensioners, people with disabilities, recent migrants, non-English-speaking people, single mothers, unemployed, homeless and other low income people) are not further disadvantaged by unsustainable population growth.

The plans must provide for adequate hospitals and health care, housing, schools and education, roads and transport, water, power and other amenities that are already severely overburdened in every city of Australia. There must be a guarantee that affordable housing will not become less likely for our young families and new migrants. Priority must be given to training our young people and indigenous people for employment.

These population plans must also consider the single most effective way for Australia to reach its climate change targets: to reduce the rates of population growth.

The plans must consider the implications of not only economic capital, but also social capital and environmental capital. Most current political decisions focus on economic grounds with little consideration of the social and environmental aspects.

We call for urgent leadership from our politicians to ensure a sensible approach to population growth.

Recommended Resource

O’Connor M., Lines W. 2008. *Overloading Australia: How Governments and Media Dither and Deny on Population*. Envirobook, Sydney. This book is a very readable account of the many reasons why Australia urgently needs a population plan. It also examines the immense influence of industry over decisions made by Australian politicians on this issue.