



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Global Population

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 17 August 2009 Page 113 Questioner Speaker Thomson, Kelvin, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (8.40 pm)—We all know that the world has plenty of problems. Let me run out some that come to mind without much effort: global warming, the food crisis, water shortages, housing affordability, overcrowded cities, transport congestion, the fisheries collapse, species extinctions, increasing prices, waste and terrorism. We scratch our heads and try to come up with solutions. It staggers me that so often we ignore the elephant in the room: increasing population. Each of these problems is either caused by or exacerbated by the global population explosion. In the first two million years of human existence, the global human population was only a few million. Up to 1950, it had managed to climb to two billion. In the 50-odd years since, it has trebled to six billion people. And the population is projected to double again.

The consequences of the present population pressure are dramatic. In my belief, it is not plausible that the world's population could double without the consequences becoming catastrophic. Yet, when it is suggested that the world's population is a problem, there is zero interest from policy makers. In my view, it is not so much a problem as the problem. Let me return to that list of problems and describe the impact of population on them.

One: global warming. Population plays a critical role in global warming. We have one earth and one atmosphere, and every carbon dioxide molecule we release into it contributes to global warming. The more of us there are, the more carbon dioxide is released—simple and undeniable. Al Gore identifies population growth as one of the big three drivers of the rapid spurt of greenhouse gasses during the past 50 years. People who believe that we can meet serious carbon targets without curbing population growth are kidding themselves; they are delusional. There is no reasonable prospect that Australia will reduce its total level of greenhouse emissions while our population grows by one million every four years as is presently the case. Population stabilisation must be part of the plan to contain greenhouse emissions not merely for Australia but for the rest of the world as well.

Two: the food crisis. The combination of declining arable land and continued population growth has caused the world's per capita food production to go into decline. We are now in a situation where there is a global shortage of food which is set to get worse. In future, more people will starve—not fewer. Figures released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation show that the number of people suffering from chronic hunger is rising, not falling. In June last year, the Australian government's Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation said that world agriculture is experiencing a growing crisis, and its first named demand-side factor was increasing global population.

Three: water shortages. As with agricultural decline, population growth is fuelling water shortages both indirectly through climate change and directly through extraction and pollution. Around the world, one in three people is suffering from water shortage. Assuming modest rates of population growth, we will use 70 per cent of the world's accessible fresh water by 2025. Already, 400 million children worldwide are drinking dangerously unclean water, and one child dies from a waterborne disease every 15 seconds. According to Melbourne Water, water scarcity in and around Melbourne is being driven by both climate change and population growth.

Four: housing affordability. Housing affordability in Australia has undergone a period of dramatic decline. John Edwards, an economist with HSBC, has noted that Australia's high level of migration, the highest level in our history, is going to keep upward pressure on house prices. The same goes for rent. The General Manager of Australian Property Monitors, Michael McNamara, has said the shortage of rental properties will continue to worsen because of rising migration.

Five: overcrowded cities. Our cities are too large. They dwarf people. The sheer scale of them is overwhelming for some, who lose the plot and fall victim to mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse. For the rest of us, the madding crowd swells every year, giving us that little bit less room. Every square metre of space is fought over. In Africa and Asia the accumulated urban growth during the whole span of history is in the process of being doubled between the years 2000 and 2030. A United Nations Population Fund report released in June 2007 says that, as a result, a billion people—one-sixth of the world's population—live in slums. The overcrowding of cities is not merely a Third World phenomenon either. In my home city of Melbourne, a lot of people of goodwill

have supported high rise as preferable to urban sprawl. What they do not realise is that it is not halting any urban sprawl at all. Suburbs continue to continue to march out onto the horizon. Property developers are having their cake and eating it too. We are growing upwards and outwards. Melbourne is becoming an obese hardened-artery parody of its former self. There is something intangible but important about the personal space of a backyard. I believe the children who grow up in concrete jungle suburbs are subject to more bullying and harassment and are more vulnerable to traps such as crime and drugs.

Six: traffic congestion. More people equals more cars, and the more cars there are out on the roads the longer it takes us to get anywhere. The time that motorists spend on the roads in and out of Brisbane, for example—to the Sunshine Coast, the Gold Coast or Ipswich—is truly appalling. Each suburb we build out of the city fringes means more traffic coming through the inner suburbs, more congestion, more pollution and more noise. It does nothing for our calm, our quality of life or our sanity. We think we have no choice but to grin and bear it. It is not true.

Seven: species extinctions. The USA based National Academy of Sciences has reported that human activities are leading to a wave of extinctions over 100 times greater than natural rates. Over 12,000 varieties of animal, plant and water life are critically endangered. Thirty per cent of Australia's 760 bird species are under threat. The world has entered the 21st century with little more than 10 per cent of its original forest cover intact. According to anthropologists Richard Leakey and Roger Lewis, all the forest cover will be largely gone by 2050. Sometimes I think we have declared war on everything else. The more there are of us the less there is of everything else. I consider it a grotesque piece of arrogance on our part as a species that we think that we have a right to destroy everything else on our way to affluence.

Eight: fisheries collapse. One of our favourite old sayings was, 'There are plenty more fish in the sea.' Not anymore: 90 per cent of the large fish in the ocean are gone. Australia is in the same boat as everyone else. Our annual catch has steadily gone down, and a Bureau of Rural Sciences fisheries status report says that two-thirds of Australia's fisheries are either overfished or uncertain.

Nine: increasing prices. Increasing population consumes resources and makes them scarcer, leading to price rises. The rising price of petrol is a clear function of scarcity fuelled by population growth, and the increased cost of basic resources such as water and petrol feeds into everything they contribute to—food costs, transport costs, insurance, housing et cetera. Some economists argue that increasing population will create economies of scale and put downward pressure on prices. In reality, this downward pressure on prices is sighted less frequently than Elvis Presley.

Ten: waste. A vast area of the central Pacific Ocean has become smothered in plastic. It is referred to as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The area affected is estimated to be twice the size of Texas and to a depth of at least 30 metres. What a disgrace!

Eleven: terrorism and war. Analysts spend a great deal of time assessing the political and religious factors leading to the scourge of terrorism and war in the modern world. They spend less time noting the underlying cause: conflict over scarce resources—scarce land, scarce water and scarce oil—brought about by increasing population. A Pentagon report in 2007 detailed a range of scenarios in which population displacement caused by global warming and triggered by extreme weather events would lead to border tensions and armed conflict. An Oxford University study has estimated that 26 million Bangladeshis, 73 million Chinese and 20 million Indians are at risk of displacement from rising sea levels.

In short, it is time for governments and policy makers around the world to come to their senses and take steps to stabilise the world's population. It needs to happen in every country, including here in Australia—especially here in dry, arid Australia. And it is time people and communities stood up and demanded better of their policy makers than the 'she'll be right' growth fetish which is making an utter mockery of our obligation to give to our children a world in as good a condition as the one our parents gave to us.