

The Inaugural Population Australia 2050 Summit – Conclusion by Kelvin Thomson, MHR for Wills

I want to conclude my remarks this afternoon by commenting on three areas – the population threat to Australia's unique wildlife, the issue of urban sprawl, and yesterday's dramatic announcement by Prime Minister Gillard.

First, the population threat to Australia's unique wildlife. Eight years ago the signatories to the Convention on Biodiversity, including Australia, made a bold and ambitious commitment to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. We are now in 2010. It is the International Year of Biodiversity. But the rate at which are species are declining shows no sign of slowing down. Let me observe here in Sydney that the greatest bird declines have occurred in the temperate south-eastern regions of Australia, which is of course where most population growth has occurred. A lot of birds are mobile and nomadic, and the destruction of habitat for housing, agriculture, roads, mining and other infrastructure to support an expanding population is destructive of their prospects.

Species like the Swift Parrot and the Regent Honeyeater are now nationally endangered. These birds are highly mobile nectar feeders. The Regent Honeyeater range and numbers have contracted greatly as a result of loss, fragmentation and degradation of habitat, with old trees dying in paddocks and the clearing of native vegetation robbing them of crucial links in the nomadic chain.

If we look at the beaches, we find a species like the Hooded Plover taking a battering due to urban sprawl along our coastlines.

People's intensive use of beaches means the Hooded Plover eggs get stepped on, or fry in the sun when adult birds are drawn away from the nest when disturbed by people or their dogs. Hooded Plovers have almost disappeared from New South Wales.

But it's not just rare species under the pump. Some of Australia's best known wildlife – Kookaburras, Emus, Koalas, Lyrebirds, and Platypus – are also taking big hits to their numbers, declining by 30%, or even 50 and 60%, in significant parts of their former range. It would be a disgrace if we were to allow our iconic wildlife to disappear from view in our watch.

Second, urban sprawl. I am more familiar with Melbourne than I am with Sydney, but I suspect the issues at stake are likely to be similar. Recently the Victorian Government, unfortunately with Opposition support, moved to expand Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary, paving the way for another 24,000 hectares of urban sprawl for Melbourne. I believe this is a mistake.

Melbourne is becoming an obese, hardened-artery parody of its former self. Extending the Urban Growth Boundary is like a man rapidly gaining weight who thinks he can solve the problem by loosening his belt.

Expanding the Urban Growth Boundary has five strikes:

1. It allows the destruction of nearly 7,000 hectares of volcanic plains grassland, and nearly 1,000 hectares of grassy woodland. Since European settlement over 95% of Victoria's original native grassland has been destroyed. We should be protecting the less than 5% we still have.
2. The 284,000 households projected in this expansion will, at the present rate of car possession, add another 400,000 cars to Melbourne, many of them trying to get to and from the CBD each day to work. We already have 2 million cars in Melbourne and massive traffic congestion, which urban sprawl will only worsen.
3. The cost of meeting the infrastructure needs of these new suburbs is massive, and new schools, public transport, health services and the rest come at the cost of meeting the needs of existing communities, such as providing a High School for Coburg.
4. Extending the Urban Growth Boundary represents a further breach into Melbourne's promised Green Wedges. In 2002 Melbourne 2030 went into areas such as Epping North which had previously been set aside as Green Wedges. It promised the non-urban area outside the Urban Growth Boundary would be better protected. In 2005 the Urban Growth Boundary was again extended, removing 11,500 hectares from Green Wedges. This was said to be enough for the next 25 years. Apparently not. Green Wedges should be permanent wedges between

growth corridors, not potential urban land supply that is bulldozed as soon as there is a demand for it.

5. Expanding the Urban Growth Boundary contradicts the Melbourne 2030 Plan. Melbourne 2030 was justified in the name of stopping urban sprawl. It hasn't. Suburbs continue to march out onto the horizon. Property developers are having their cake and eating it too. We're growing both upwards and outwards.

Five years ago Melbourne's population was increasing at 55,000 per annum. Now it is increasing at the rate of 110,000 per annum. We are on the way to five million, then six million, then seven million. In my view this will not give us a better Melbourne than the one we have now, it will give us a poorer one.

And finally, to yesterday's dramatic announcement by Prime Minister Gillard that she does not support what has become known as a big Australia – a population of 36 or even 40 million by 2050.

Inevitably when a Prime Minister or a Government says or does something there is a political analysis – Why are they doing this? What are they up to? While this is pretty much unavoidable, I think the explanation here is a pretty simple conjunction of the Prime Minister's own convictions with the views of the vast majority of Australians.

I have been very anxious to ensure that the debate we have to have about population did not descend into the gutter with allegations of racism and the like, and I have been very pleased that it has not. I have been very clear about my own position on such matters – I have no designs on the non-discriminatory migration policy, I support an increase in our refugee intake, and I support an increase in Australia's overseas aid to the world's poorest people to meet the United Nations target of 0.7% of Gross National Income.

I have worked very hard to stay out of the debate concerning refugee and asylum seeker policies during the past year, because the number of people involved is just a fraction of Australia's migration intake and it should not derail the larger debate. There are some people who want to talk incessantly about boat people and say nothing about the skyrocketing of visas in the skilled migration category, for overseas students who have been able to stay on indefinitely, and the temporary entry visas.

So I will enter the debate about refugee and asylum seekers today to make two points only. The tail has been wagging the dog; we should focus on the debate on the total migration program, not a small component of it. Secondly, I believe there is a large reservoir of goodwill and compassion within the Australian community towards asylum seekers, but one of the things that drains that reservoir of goodwill is the difficulties people experience – cost of living pressures, housing affordability, loss of open space, traffic congestion – caused by migration-fuelled population growth. If we get that under control, then we will find that reservoir of

goodwill replenishing itself, and find the policy questions surrounding asylum seekers less emotive and fraught than they are at present.

So I am really pleased by the announcement by the Prime Minister that she intends to take a new direction in population policy, and to chart a course away from growth towards sustainability.

It shows the Prime Minister is on the wavelength of ordinary Australians. 70% of Australians don't want our population to reach 36 million. When Treasury released its projections of a 36 million population for Australia in September last year, I said this would be too many, and I called for a national debate on this issue.

We have been having this debate. Australians have expressed their concern about the impact of rising population on our food and water supplies, on housing affordability, on traffic congestion, on the quality of life in our cities, on our carbon emissions and on our endangered wildlife.

The Prime Minister has recognized this concern, and I am very encouraged by what this means for the kind of Australia we are going to leave as a legacy for future generations of Australians.