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In August last year I gave a speech to the Australian Parliament in which I advanced two propositions – first, that the world has a population problem, and secondly, that Australia has a population problem.

I had come to the first conclusion – that the world has a population problem - for two reasons. The first was that, no matter what problem I looked at, as a public policy maker trying to do my bit to make the world a better place, whether it was global warming, or food shortages, or water shortages, or declining housing affordability, or overcrowded cities, or traffic congestion, or fisheries collapse, or our vanishing native birds, plants, and animals, or increasing prices and cost of living, or waste, or even war and terrorism, that each and every one of these problems was either caused by, or exacerbated by, global population growth. And the second reason I had decided that the world had a population problem we needed to talk about and face up to was this: although I had long felt that population growth was highly damaging to the environment and had various other black marks as well, I had believed those demographers who had been assuring us that this was a problem which would take care of itself over time, and that no government action was required.

But as the population figures came in each year, always exceeding the estimates and predictions of these demographers, and as I became increasingly seized of the urgency of action to tackle climate change, and saw on the TV each night famine, around the world, and wars being fought over rights to land and water, I concluded that these demographers had been pulling my leg – this problem is not going to solve itself at all.

And in relation to Australia's specific population problem, a month after my August speech the Australian Treasury released updated projections for Australia's population. They projected that Australia's population would rise to 35 million by 2049. This was a large upward revision on the previous projection, made only a couple of years earlier, of 28 million by 2049. Our present population is 22 million, so it represents a projected increase of over 60% over the next 40 years.

I said when this projection was announced that 35 million by 2049 would be too many, and that this was a recipe for environmental disaster. I expressed 4 key objections to a 35 million population for Australia.

First, the impact of a 60% increase in Australia's population on our native wildlife will be catastrophic. Already over 200 species of Australia's birds are under threat – 30% of our 760 species.

Secondly, what about carbon emissions? The Australian Government has undertaken to cut greenhouse emissions by 60% over the next 40 years, and many scientists are saying we need to cut them by 80% to tackle global warming. How are we supposed to do that if our population is going up by 60% at the same time? It's pretty hard to reduce your carbon footprint when you keep adding more feet.

Third, there's the impact on the availability of food, water, energy and land. These things are already stretched and a 60% population increase will only drive up the prices of these essentials, and lower our living standards.

And fourth, what about the impact on our major cities like Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane? Declining housing affordability, traffic congestion, overcrowded concrete jungles. I live in Melbourne, and I've seen it grow and change over many years. I don't want it to become like Mexico City, or Karachi, or Jakarta, or New York!

I said another 14 million people will not give us a richer country. It will spread our mineral wealth more thinly and give us a poorer one. The Treasury has since revised its forecast up again, to be 36 million by 2050. When I got stuck into this forecast and said we needed to have a national debate about this there was a certain amount of boldness involved because the Labor Party, of which I am a member, had no policy about population and we hadn't had a debate at the political level about this issue for years and years. So I didn't know what to expect.

I got a certain amount of publicity for my views on talkback radio and elsewhere, but certainly not overwhelming coverage. But there was apparently enough debate for one of Australia's most significant TV political talk show hosts, Kerry O'Brien, to ask then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd what he thought of the idea of Australia at 35 million. Kevin Rudd responded that he "actually believed in a Big Australia". That response set the scene for a substantial national debate, with people declaring themselves for or against a "Big Australia", ie Australia to go to 35 or 36 million.

The good news from my point of view was that the debate showed that at least 2 out of 3 Australians, and sometimes upwards of 70%, think a population of 36 million is not a good thing for Australia. People don't want it. This was not such a good thing for Kevin Rudd. Although it was certainly not the only cause of his downfall – the Government's retreat over climate change some months later played a bigger role – it did mark the start of a decline in Labor's polling support and in his personal approval ratings from which he never recovered.

One thing I noticed in the many responses I received last year to my comments was that although most people agreed with me that 35 or 36 million people would be too many, a lot of people thought it was inevitable, that there was nothing we can do about it. Certainly for Australia that is simply not true. Australia's population is absolutely a function of its net overseas migration number. The reason Australia's population is skyrocketing is because that number has gone up from the 70,000 it used to be to being 280,000 in 2009.

To show that population growth was not inevitable, I drew up a 14 Point Plan for Population Reform, a plan to stabilize Australia's population. It's on my website for people who are interested in the detail, but the heart of the Plan is leveling out and stabilizing Australia's population by 2050 at twenty-six million (not thirty-six million) by cutting net overseas migration to 70,000 per annum. This is not anti-migration – it's not zero migration, or zero net migration, it's saying let's return to the kind of number we frequently had in the 1960's, 70s, 80 and even 1990's.

It keeps the family reunion program where it has been, but takes the axe to skilled migration, which in Australia more than quadrupled in a decade from 24,000 per annum to over 100,000.

Over Christmas and the New Year the population debate heated up – it became something people were talking about at Christmas Dinners and family gatherings. One important factor fuelling this was the rapid jump in migration both permanent and temporary – the latter through increased temporary work permits and greatly increased overseas student numbers – which many Australians could both sense and were now reading about. Secondly, there was Dick Smith. Dick Smith rang me late last year to say that his daughter had raised the issue of population with him, and had directed his attention to a speech on YouTube which I had done on this issue. Dick agreed with my views, and wanted to get involved.

His efforts, including the making of a documentary, Population Puzzle, which screened during the recent Federal Election in Australia, have done a lot to promote the debate in Australia. Dick is a highly successful business man who was Australian of the Year many years ago for his aviation feats. He is routinely listed amongst the 10 most trusted Australians, according to Reader's Digest magazine. He is articulate, passionate about Australia, and utterly fearless.

Early this year I was pleased to see other politicians taking an interest in this issue. The Greens leader Bob Brown said 36 million was too many and advocated, as I have done, a cut in skilled migration. Liberal Party spokesmen started querying the wisdom of "Big Australia". Around Easter former Prime Minister Rudd announced the establishment of a Minister for Population, with a brief to develop a national population policy over the next 12 months. While some saw this as an attempt to avoid dealing with the issue until after the election, I felt that developing a policy on population was a step forward. Until now we've had no population policy, and the default policy has been full throttle runaway population growth.

But the biggest breakthrough came after Julia Gillard became Prime Minister, in June. Her first big public announcement was that she did not believe in a “Big Australia”.

She pursued this conviction into the Federal Election campaign, telling her own constituents that “I do not support the idea of a ‘big Australia’, with arbitrary targets of 40 million people. We need to stop and take a breath.”

She said she didn’t want us hurtling towards a big Australia, and that we should “not sacrifice our wonderful environment or our unique quality of community life”.

Ultimately I don’t think population was a major vote changer in the recent election. The Liberal Opposition neutralized Labor’s foray into this area by advocating a cut in net overseas migration to 170,000 per annum. Labor was able to counter this thrust in turn by pointing out that net overseas migration is already trending back to this number. The fact is that the 170,000 figure will still give us a population of 35 million by 2050. Not much to excite the voters there.

If either Julia Gillard had put her opposition to a Big Australia into tangible form, by setting a lower net migration target, or Tony Abbott had picked a lower, status quo altering, number, there is no doubt in my mind there were votes there for the taking. Given the closeness of the election result, it is a tantalizing thought.

Nevertheless Julia Gillard’s clear opposition to a Big Australia has created a strong expectation around Australia that we will see a change of direction from the rapid population growth path of recent times, once the Panels she has appointed to investigate the issues have done their work and reported early next year. Nothing can be taken for granted, however. The big business and property developer forces who are both the cheer squad for, and beneficiaries of, rapid population growth, have no intention of submitting quietly. They will continue to press for high migration at every available opportunity.

So what advice do I have for people who want a population debate and a change of direction in your own country? First, you need a tangible outcome of the present path which you can focus on and mobilize against. In Australia that is the Treasury projection of 36 million by 2050. You need an official figure whose consequences you can analyze and campaign against. At present many countries are like proverbial frogs in slowly boiling water – someone needs to point out where this is all heading.

Secondly, you need to set out an alternative to that outcome. A lot of people don’t like population growth, but they don’t think anyone can do anything about it. You have to overcome that sense of powerlessness with a Plan. My 14 Point Plan involves stabilizing Australia’s population as soon as I think we reasonably can – I think of it as trying to land a plane, as smoothly as possible, before it runs out of fuel and crashes. I know some people believe we have too many people already, but I think cutting population is unrealistic – it certainly is for Australia – and will simply frighten off potential supporters.

Third, you need to avoid debates about race, religion, and ethnicity like the plague. A lot of people on the left of politics, or in environment groups, run scared of the population debate for fear of being sucked into this whirlpool. I have in place 5 blockers to try to stop it happening to me. The first is my 20 plus years in State and Federal Parliaments representing a highly multicultural electorate. During that time I have a proud and unimpeachable record of helping constituents from all backgrounds in realizing their aspirations as Australians.

Second, I always make it clear I have no designs on Australia's non-discriminatory migration policy. I do not have a view about where our migrants should come from. I sometimes wish, just so we could banish the ugly issue of race from this debate, that everyone the world over was of the same race and religion (without of course, expressing any view as to which race or religion it should be!)

The other three blockers are three of the points in the 14 Point Plan. First, I propose an increase in Australia's refugee intake. It is presently just a small proportion of our migrant intake. It could be increased within the context of a much smaller overall program.

Second, I propose that Australia lifts its overseas aid to the 0.7% of Gross National Product, in accordance with the United Nations target. We can and should be compassionate, decent international citizens, but aid is far more effective than migration in helping the world's poor. And third, we should get rid of Australia's Baby Bonus, a government subsidy for new children. The Baby Bonus doesn't seem to have much effect on Australia's fertility rate. It is money which could be much better spent, for example educating and training young Australians who are presently missing out on University or trades educations.

The fourth thing you need to do is tackle the myths about population growth – that it is necessary for economic prosperity, that it is necessary to counter population ageing, that it is necessary for national defence, that it is about being unselfish etc etc. I'm sure you've had lots of practice at this, and Mark O'Connor's book, *Overloading Australia*, is outstanding for people looking for information to help in this task.

Finally, you need to be a bit difficult and unco-operative. Big business and property developers are forever claiming that population growth is good for us, but they depend on our passively accepting its numerous negative consequences. In Australia population growth is causing higher electricity bills and council rates. It is causing a loss of habitat for native birds, plants and animals. It is causing local communities to be deprived of their say in planning decisions, because generally local people don't want high rise buildings in their neighbourhood. It causes clearways and parking meters in urban shopping centres to deal with traffic congestion. It causes water restrictions. Now I know the first instinct of a lot of people on the left of politics, and those concerned for the environment, is for co-operation. We tend to be seduced by appeals to selflessness, by appeals to suffering, privation and hardship for the common good. But the truth at the moment is that we are being stooged.

There are a lot of debates we need to have in Australia and around the world about the shape of our cities, our transport system, our way of using energy, our lifestyle, and yes, our selfishness. But until we get to grips with population reform these debates are idle. The gains we make simply get swallowed up by population growth.

So do not accept hardship and privation and appeals to selflessness from people who are themselves being utterly selfish – pursuing only their corporate bottom line. Make sure when each of these hardships come up that people see the link with population growth. That is the best way of protecting and passing on to our children and grandchildren a world in as good a condition as the one our parents and grandparents gave to us. I cannot think of a more important, or urgent, task!

Kelvin Thomson