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Overpopulation and Climate Change – The Deadly Duo
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Population plays a critical role in global warming. We have one earth, with one atmosphere, and every carbon dioxide molecule we release into contributes to global warming. There's little point thinking about our emissions 'intensity' or our emissions 'per capita'. All that matters is how much carbon, and how much other greenhouse gas, we are pumping into the atmosphere. The more of us there are, the more carbon dioxide is released. Simple, undeniable. Al Gore identifies population growth as one of the big three drivers of the rapid spurt of greenhouse gases during the past 50 years.

Scientists have made it very clear that in order to avoid dangerous climate change we have to contain the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to 450 parts per million CO₂ equivalent or less. In order to meet this target we have to cut our global carbon emissions by 60 % by the year 2050. The developing countries are not going to cut their emissions by such an amount, and given the impoverished lifestyles which many of their citizens lead, it is quite unreasonable to expect them to. Given this, the developed countries have to make cuts greater than 60%. They have to cut by more like 80%. The task is daunting enough for both developed and developing countries – the developed countries must slash their emissions without ruining their economies, the developing countries must lift living standards without increasing their greenhouse emissions. How much greater is the degree of difficulty for both developed and developing countries when the population continues to grow. It is as though we are standing on the window ledge of a tall building. Behind us the building is on fire. A narrow plank crosses over to a safe building on the other side. We must cross over without falling. Our increasing population is the equivalent of making the crossing with both arms tied behind our back. People who believe we can meet serious carbon targets without curbing population growth are kidding themselves, they are delusional. It's pretty hard to reduce your carbon footprint when you keep adding more feet.

Australia is one of the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases in the world. There is no reasonable prospect that Australia will reduce its total level of greenhouse emissions, or even cap its level of emissions, while our population grows by 1 million every three years, as is presently the case. To do so would require massive, implausible, reductions in per capita greenhouse emission levels. Population policy must be part of the plan to contain greenhouse emissions, not merely for Australia, but for the rest of the world as well.

The deadly duo of climate change and overpopulation will cause a potent cocktail of consequences frequently interacting with each other – local and international conflict over water, population displacement from famine, population displacement due to sea level rise, population displacement due to weather catastrophes, and conflict over mega-projects such as dams and biofuel projects.

Mega project investments such as dams are a feature of the rapid industrialisation of the world's two most populous countries, China and India. Anywhere between 40 and 80 million people have already been forcibly evicted from their lands to make way for dams.

Another set of mega projects currently being canvassed to meet the energy needs of a growing population is nuclear power. The idea – not a new one – has recently found favour with the European Union. But a new growth phase for nuclear reactors would surely exacerbate the problem of weapons grade material falling into the hand of terrorists. The situation is already precarious enough, as events in Pakistan, Iran and North Korea have amply demonstrated.

Large-scale investment projects involving biofuels are also problematic. Diverting food grains into the production of fuels has taken a lot of land out of food production, driven up food prices, driven small farmers from their lands, and generated conflict and instability. It should also be noted that the carbon efficiency of biofuel production has been challenged, with claims that it is variable and often poorer than that of fossil fuels.

Population growth and climate change are inextricably interwoven. Population growth increases greenhouse gas emissions, and in turn the effects of global warming are exacerbated by large populations, which have nowhere to go and no margin for error.

The interaction of climate change and overpopulation will have far reaching consequences. We should not, in all good conscience, seek to isolate or insulate ourselves from this situation, and we can not, even if we wished to. Ultimately, we're all in the same boat.

The United Nations projects that by 2050 world population will rise 40% to more than 9 billion. This increase makes the task of cutting carbon emissions by 60% by 2050 – already challenging enough – positively Herculean. Trying to tackle carbon emissions while ignoring the population elephant in the room is, in my view, simply not fair dinkum.

Some people think that rising population is inevitable and unstoppable. It isn't, and last year I released a 14 point plan for population reform to show that it isn't.

The first 11 points go to how we can stabilise Australia's population.

1. Stabilise Australia's population by cutting the net overseas migration program to 70,000 per annum.
2. Cut the skilled migration program to 25,000 per annum.
3. Hold the family reunion program at 50,000 per annum.
4. Increase the refugee program from 13,750 to 20,000 per annum.
5. Alter the refugee criteria to include provision for genuine climate refugees.
6. The revised number of annual permanent arrivals from these programs would be 95,000 – 50,000 family reunion plus 25,000 skilled plus 20,000 refugees. Two more factors need to be considered – the number of people departing permanently from Australia, and the number of people arriving permanently from New Zealand. To reach a net overseas annual migration target of 70,000, the number of automatic places available for New Zealanders needs to be restricted to the number of departures from Australia over and above 25,000. The Trans Tasman Travel Arrangement would be renegotiated to achieve this, splitting available places for New Zealanders equally between skilled migrants and family reunion, and allowing New Zealanders to also apply and compete with other applicants under these normal migration programs.
7. Reduce temporary migration to Australia by restricting sub-class 457 temporary entry visas to medical and health related and professional engineering occupations.
8. Require overseas students to return to their country of origin before being eligible to apply for permanent residence.
9. Abolish the Baby Bonus.

10. Restrict Large Family Supplement and Family Tax Benefit A for third and subsequent children to those presently receiving them.
11. Dedicate the savings from abolishing the Baby Bonus and reduced expenditure on Family Payments for third and subsequent children towards getting rid of HECS and vocational education fees.

The final three points go to how we can play a role in helping stabilise global population.

12. Increase Australia's aid to meet the United Nations target of 0.7% of Gross National Income with money saved by abolishing Fringe Benefits Tax concessions for company cars, and greater use of off-the-shelf purchases in defence equipment.
13. Use more of Australia's aid budget for educating girls and women, and for better access to family planning and maternal child health, and advocate in the United Nations and international fora for other countries to do likewise.
14. Put overpopulation on the Agenda for international Climate Change talks.

I believe it is everybody's responsibility to curb population growth. And I think that achieving an equitable approach to population is far conceptually easier than the very tricky and complex matter of which countries must carry what burden of tackling greenhouse emissions. I think each and every country ought to commit to stabilising its population. This is challenging, but as Bill Clinton says, no good ever came from thinking small. Each country should aim to get to a situation where births equal deaths, and emigration equals immigration.

With each country pulling its weight in this way, no one could complain that others were getting a free ride. And indeed until countries do commit to stabilising their population, much of the greenhouse targets debate is likely to continue to be deadlocked, going around in circles, as happened in Bali in 2007 and Copenhagen in 2009.

Each country must get its own house in order and stabilise its own population. In equity terms, this is an easier issue to deal with than carbon emissions, where the poorer countries have a legitimate anger that the wealthy countries have had all the fun; wrecked the neighbourhood, and the police have been called in to shut the party down just as they were starting to arrive.

The equitable approach is for each country to pull its own weight and stabilise its own numbers. Every country should be asked to do no more, and no less, than this.