

POPULATION REFORM – POLITICAL CHALLENGES

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I have been greatly encouraged by the avalanche of supportive emails, letters and phone calls I and my office have received since I first spoke on the issue of population in the Parliament back in August. The response I have received – over 95% support – reaffirms the opinion poll evidence that 60% of Australians believe that a population of 35 million by 2049 (the most recent official Treasury projections) is too many.

We have a lot of supporters out there. What I want to talk about this afternoon is how do we win this – how do we meet the political challenges and translate that support into real policy change and a better future for our children, Australia and the world.

The first political challenge is to understand the problem. We have to understand where the push for higher population comes from. While some of it comes from migrant representatives, and some of it comes from particular religious leaders, who adhere to highly literal interpretations of religious texts written when the world's population was one twenty-fifth what it is now, most of it comes from sections of business. Business enjoys close and regular access to political parties and political leaders courtesy of endless fundraising breakfasts, fundraising lunches, and fundraising dinners.

During my political lifetime money has assumed a progressively larger role. Mass political parties used to have plenty of volunteers to letterbox their material. Increasingly the volunteers have disappeared, and political parties look to paid distribution services such as Australia Post or the private distributors to distribute their material.

This of course costs money. So too does alternative means of campaigning, such as TV, radio and newspaper ads. And it's also the case that political parties are wary about getting offside with business. And regrettably some business entities, and property developers in particular, are in the ears of politicians, day in, day out, seeking high population. They regard population growth as the yellow brick road to easy profit. For them it has two functions – creating a pool of surplus labour to put downward pressure on wages and salaries, and even more importantly building a bigger market to generate more sales. It seems easier than competing with rival businesses over market share.

One other group we need to be aware of who are fond of population growth is Treasury and other government bureaucrats, because population growth means a bigger GDP. It doesn't mean we're better off – if a country's wealth increases by 25%, while its population increases by 60%, on average each resident is actually poorer. But the media always report GDP, rather than GDP per person, and it always **sounds** good to be able to say the economy is growing, and hope that nobody looks at the fine print.

Upton Sinclair put it succinctly: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it”.

So that is what we are up against. I don't think anyone in this room underestimates them, and we certainly shouldn't – they have won every single battle so far. Australia's runaway population, and the world's, bears that out.

The second political challenge is to expose the arguments in favour of rising population for the myths they are. Let me deal with

seven of them. First, that we need a bigger population to drive economic growth and prosperity. The bigger is better myth. If this were true, the wealthiest per person nations in the world would be those with the biggest populations. They're not. In fact eight of the top 10 nations in the world in terms of per person GDP have populations of less than 10 million.

Sweden, for example, is entrenched in the world's top 10, with a growing economy but a population which has been stable for many years. On the other hand, Argentina started the 20th Century far wealthier than Australia, but having doubled our population growth, Argentina today has per person GDP worth only 40% of Australia's.

I hear some population boosters lamenting that Europe's population has stopped growing and saying we don't want to follow that example, calling it stagnation and so on. Europe's population is indeed now about the same as it was in 1950. But of those ten wealthiest per person countries, eight are in Europe.

Do the population boosters seriously prefer what has happened in Africa? Since 1950 Africa's population has more than quadrupled, growing from 221 million then to 973 million last year. 25 years ago Ethiopia had a population of around 34 million. Now its population is 72 million.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation the number of chronically hungry people in the world – people suffering from perpetual and severe hunger – has risen to 1 billion. In addition, as many as two billion more people live in perpetual food insecurity, missing meals and often not knowing where their next meal will come from.

No prizes for guessing where this increased misery is happening – it isn't Europe. World population growth is precisely the reason why world food prices have risen and why more people, not less, are starving and suffering from water-borne diseases.

And for Australia, runaway population means our mineral and resource wealth is spread more thinly, and there is greater competition for our available food, water, petrol and land, pushing up food prices, pushing up the price of housing, pushing up the price of water, pushing up the price of petrol. We are not – repeat not – better off as a consequence of this.

The second myth is that a bigger population will tackle population and workforce ageing, and that population and workforce ageing is a terrible problem. Let me observe that the 14 point Population Reform Plan I have proposed would not lead to an ageing population or workforce. But we should not fall for this idea that social ageing is a disaster and older people are a burden. Ageing is a sign of success, individually and as a society. The 'oldest' societies are the healthiest and wealthiest, the youngest societies are those with the lowest life expectancy. We are not just ageing, we are ageing healthier, and are capable of working on for longer than we used to. And there is abundant scope to bring people into the workforce who are presently not in it – many young people are out of it, many aged between 45 and 65 are out of it, many indigenous Australians are out of it. Bringing them in would be good for them and good for the country.

And if you really think workforce ageing is a disaster, let me quote from the Department of Treasury Economic Roundup of December 2000, which said "in response to the slowdown in the growth of the working age population, business may introduce incentives to retain existing workers, encourage them to increase the number of

hours they work or defer their retirement, and to attract additional workers into the labour force. These incentives could take the form of higher real wages or other non-pecuniary benefits such as the opportunity to work from home, part-time hours for those full-time workers considering retirement, or more generous maternity leave arrangements”.

So there you have it, folks – this is the catastrophe that awaits us if we don’t act to increase the population – higher real wages, working from home, part-time options, more generous maternity leave arrangements! What a disaster!

The third argument for increasing population is that this will make Australia a bigger country, and that we should aspire to a ‘big’ Australia. This argument is harder to understand than an episode of “Lost”. Australia is already a big country. Bringing more people to Australia means there is less room for us as individuals, we lose our backyards and get cooped up in high rises. In my book that makes a place smaller.

A big country is one we can share with koalas and kookaburras and platypus and wombats and lyrebirds. A big country is one with wide-open spaces where you can drive for miles and hear yourself think. If you drive up or down Australia’s eastern seaboard now it’s all suburbs and traffic lights and retail franchises – that’s not a bigger country, it’s a shrinking one!

The fourth argument for increasing our population is that other countries have. Australia is not overcrowded compared to other countries, it is said, and our cities are not overcrowded compared to other cities around the world. Recently we were told to take a look at Bangladesh. We have, believe me, we have! We don’t want to live like Bangladesh. With the greatest of respect, that’s the whole bloody point!

The population of Bangladesh has doubled since 1971, from 75 million to 150 million. Needless to say its per person GDP is miserable – just \$421 US for the whole year 2003-04, and it is one of the poorest countries in the world, with severe deficiencies in its health and nutrition services.

And yes, Australian cities are less crowded than many of those overseas. But what **is** this cultural cringe that causes us to believe that Australia and the Australian way of life are somehow inferior to those of other countries and other cities? If Australia is not as good a place to live as other countries, how come so many people are busting their backsides to live here?

When we start seeing boat loads of people **leaving** Australia, then it will be time to start thinking about where we're going wrong. In the meantime, why don't we celebrate Australia and its way of life and seek to protect it?

The fifth argument for increasing population, one I heard recently from a former Howard Government Minister, is that this will give us more weight in international forums. By this he means more power and influence. But power for its own sake is over-rated. The power and influence I want for Australia is the power and influence which comes from setting a good example – keeping open spaces for our unique native wildlife, keeping our food, water and housing affordable and our cities safe and liveable, having room for refugees and a generous overseas aid program, cutting our carbon footprint. These are the things that will provide leadership to the world and give us real weight.

The sixth argument for increasing population relates specifically to migration, and says that a high migration policy is evidence of our

compassion, and is a duty we owe to peoples around the world less fortunate than ourselves. I am personally strongly in favour of Australia being a compassionate international citizen, and have proposed a 45% increase in our refugee intake from 13,750 to 20,000 and that we maintain our family reunion intake at 50,000 per annum. But the skilled migration program cannot be defended as Australia's obligation to the world. Skilled migrants are claimed to be bringing to Australia skills we don't have; to the extent that they **are** skilled they are actually denuding the countries from which they come. This is not Australia being compassionate; this is us being selfish.

Moreover, I think we should be wary of appeals to our better nature when the outcome of those appeals is not a better Australia or a better world, and when those appealing to us to be unselfish are in fact being utterly selfish themselves, putting their corporate bottom line and personal financial interests ahead of everything else.

It is utterly insincere of business or political leaders or commentators to call on Australians to make sacrifices in the shape of water restrictions, reducing our carbon emissions, paying more for food, housing, water and petrol, having less open space and more traffic congestion, less say in planning decisions about the neighbourhood in which we live, when the value of these various hardships is absolutely undone by increasing population.

I am not in favour of selfishness in the pursuit of ever greater material wealth, I am not in favour of greed, I am not in favour of ripping off and exploiting those less fortunate than ourselves, but I believe we are entitled to fight to protect our standard of living and the Australian way of life. Don't be conned into giving these things up by appeals to selflessness made with all the sincerity of a Mississippi river boat gambler.

The last myth coming from population boosters I want to mention is that it will all take care of itself. Yes population is rising now, they say, but soon it will level off and stabilise of its own accord. Extreme versions of this even claim that in future our population will fall. For a long time I thought there was something in this. The realization that all the past projections of population numbers were gross underestimates and that this problem is **not** going to solve itself, is a key reason why I have started calling publicly for population reform.

Back in 1984 the World Bank's population projection for the year 2100 was 21 million. We reached that in 2007! A decade ago, forecasters were predicting we wouldn't hit the 22 million mark until 2040. We're there already! Two years ago Treasury's Intergenerational Report predicted Australia would be 28 million by 2049 – within just 2 years, they'd revised that figure up by 25% to 35 million.

So the idea that population growth is a problem that will one day solve itself is also a myth.

Having refuted the arguments in favour of higher population, the next political challenge is to come up with an alternative. As well as addressing those who believe population growth is desirable, we have to address those who think that it's inevitable. They don't believe anything can be done about it, that it's out of control. We have to point out that some countries have done it, so we can too. And we need to have an alternative. Two weeks ago I set out a 14 point Plan for Population Reform.

The heart of this Plan is a proposal to stabilise Australia's population at 26 million by 2050, by cutting net overseas migration

to 70,000 per annum. While refugee numbers would increase, and family reunion numbers would be held constant, skilled migration would return to the 25,000 figure of the mid 1990's. Temporary entry sub-class 457 visa permits would be restricted. A renewed focus on educating, skilling and training young Australians at Universities, TAFEs and apprenticeships would receive a funding boost with money obtained from abolishing the baby bonus and limiting family payments for third and subsequent children to those already receiving them.

The policy I released generated a certain amount of controversy in New Zealand because it proposed a cap on the presently uncapped Trans-Tasman scheme. So I did some more work on this, and the formula I propose in fact would not have prevented any New Zealanders wishing to migrate to Australia from doing so in any of the years I looked at, which were the four years from 2004-05 to 2007-08.

You might ask why I put the cap in place, and why I have kept it, when it doesn't seem to have any practical impact. The reason is this. When I propose stabilising the population through 70,000 net annual migration, I can be asked – “but you don't know how many people are going to leave Australia in any given year”, and I would have to admit I don't. And I could be asked – “you don't know how many people are going to come to Australia from New Zealand in any given year, do you?” And I would have to admit that I don't. So I could be challenged that given this, I simply couldn't guarantee a net 70,000 or indeed **any** figure. So the point of having a cap, and linking Australian departures to New Zealand arrivals, is that it will give us control over our net migration figure, and is an essential ingredient in delivering a population policy. And indeed there may be circumstances where the levels of departures from Australia or the levels of applicants from New Zealand necessitate the application of the cap.

The fourth political challenge is to have a strategy. There are a number of elements of such a strategy I want to suggest this afternoon. The first is about unity. To succeed in any political endeavour you have to work co-operatively. There has to be some give and take. People will naturally have differences of opinion about particular points, though I have been delighted by the degree of support I have received for important elements of my plan, such as increasing the refugee intake while at the same time greatly reducing the overall migration program. We need to respect differences of opinion, and keep nitpicking about detail to a minimum. When you're up against what we are up against, it's a luxury we can't afford.

Next, avoid traps which see people of goodwill who care about Australia's future being played off against each other.

Planning is a classic example. People who oppose the loss of open spaces and backyards in the inner city to high rise and multi-unit developments get told they are contributing to urban sprawl. People who oppose the extension of the urban growth boundary get told they are contributing to high rise and contributing to the blight of "veni, veci, verdi", which I am told is "I came, I saw, I concreted". By pitting people in the inner city areas against people in the outer suburbs, planners and developers get to have their cake and eat it too. Our cities grow both upwards and outwards. It is OK to say, Not In My Backyard! We do have rights and should have rights, concerning the kind of neighbourhood we live in. But when we seek to exercise those rights, it should not be at someone else's expense, and that is what population stabilisation is all about. It means no-one has to lose their neighbourhood character, no-one has to lose their open space.

I was pleased to see the public transport campaigner Paul Mees recently come out and say we don't all have to surrender our backyards and live in high rise in order to have a decent public transport system. I have always supported public transport, but it should not be used as a justification for increasing population density. People who don't like increasing population density should not be played off against public transport advocates.

We also need to draw the link between the myriad problems we see daily in our community, and runaway population growth. Interest rate rises is a classic example. The Reserve Bank regularly cites rising house prices as a reason for lifting interest rates. And the principal factor driving house prices ever higher is population growth. Rising interest rates is a bad thing for both business and home-owners with mortgages, and we should constantly point out the link. And we should not fall for the idea that rising house prices is a good thing. It might feel good if the price of your house goes up, but it doesn't feel so good when your mortgage and rate bills follow it. And yes you could sell your house, but you will still need somewhere to live, and you will find that the price of houses everywhere, and rents for that matter, have gone up as well. It is a zero sum game. And yes, some people own more than one house, and use property as an investment. But they will find this doesn't make it any easier for their children to afford to purchase a house.

Housing affordability in cities like Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane is among the worst in the world. When I was 25 I put down a deposit and took out a loan to purchase a house. Today a 25 year old doing that is as rare as rocking horse manure. It is a shame. Home buying encourages personal financial responsibility, as opposed to binge drinking and endless expenditure on mobile phones and computer games.

Similarly, we need to draw the link between rising prices for essentials like food, water, petrol and electricity and population growth. The reason these prices keep rising is simple – demand is outstripping supply. People need to understand that the reason their trips to the supermarket keep costing more is population growth.

When **unemployment** is discussed, or casualisation of the workforce, we need to point out if that we reduced skilled migration and temporary entry 457 work visas, there would be more jobs available for our young, for our mature-aged workers, for people with disabilities, for aboriginal Australians.

When **climate change** is discussed we need to make the point that it's pretty hard to reduce your carbon footprint when you keep adding more feet. This is true right around the globe – the world is on the road to increase its population by 50% by 2050, at the same time as scientists are saying we have to cut carbon emissions by 60%. This needs to be on the Copenhagen Agenda.

And when business leaders say, government should be spending more on infrastructure, or levels of government impose taxes and levies to fund new transport or electricity infrastructure, or when people complain about traffic congestion or the monstrosity being built next door to them or down the street, we need to point out – these things wouldn't be needed if we stabilized our population. We need to hammer home the daily consequences of runaway population growth. We need to point out that a man who drives like hell is bound to get there.

The final element of campaign strategy I want to suggest is the need to build support networks and international contacts with like-minded people and organizations. I am recommending that people

join Sustainable Population Australia, and I believe that by working together and sharing information and making our views known through the media, the Internet, and directly to political leaders and policy makers we **will** make progress. We need to encourage and learn from the experience of like minded groups around the world. I believe there is a lot of support for our position, but it needs to be harnessed and mobilised.

This brings me to my fifth and final political challenge – the need for patience. Quite a few of the emails and letters I have received have urged me to present my views to the Prime Minister or the Immigration Minister at once. They have the view that what I am saying is so sensible and reasonable that all I have to do is to present my views and they will be instantly adopted. Would that things were so simple! The pressures governments and policy-makers are under from business are massive.

Political leaders, appropriately in a democracy, listen for the voice of the electorate. We need to make our voice heard. Since I first starting raising this issue back in August, I have received a supportive stack of emails and letters you couldn't jump over. I have received support from former Labor Ministers, State and Federal, members of other political parties, and hundreds of ordinary Australians.

I said back in August that we needed to have a debate about population reform, and it is happening. Newspapers are regularly carrying articles and opinion pieces about it. Radios and TV stations have carried stories and interviews about it. Two opinion polls have showed that 60% of Australians believe that Australia at 35 million is too many. The Australian Conservation Foundation is supporting population stabilisation, and I sense that other environmental and non-government organizations are starting to

find their voice concerning an issue about which they have long been timid.

For environmentalists for years population growth has been like Voldemort in the Harry Potter books – the evil which can't be named. I hope that is changing.

But these particular Walls of Jericho are not going to fall down after a couple of days or months of trumpet blowing. It will take a sustained effort. Sometimes political victories come swiftly, but other times it requires a long hard slog, and the patience to see it through.

So, to recap, understand who you're up against, counter their myths and arguments, come up with an alternative, have a strategy, and settle in for the long term.

I know this is intensely frustrating to people who see this beautiful country and its precious native wildlife being exposed to new pressures and stresses every day. I **share** that frustration. But I am totally convinced that this patience, and this issue, is worth it.

It is absolutely central to the core obligation of stewardship that we have as human beings to pass on to our children, and to our grandchildren, a world, and an Australian way of life, in as good a condition as the one our parents and grandparents gave to us.