

A Population Policy for Australia

Preamble

Doctors for the Environment Australia's viewpoint on this complex issue is based upon principles of environmental and social sustainability which, if neglected are likely to affect the future health and wellbeing of all Australians. We also recognise our interdependence with all other peoples and countries and, as a wealthy and developed country, our need to play a leadership role in mitigating the problems facing the world.

World population

The world's population is now over 6.2 billion and is projected to reach 9 billion within the next 50 years. There is ample evidence that the activities of the past and present population have caused serious environmental harm and are reducing resources necessary to sustain civilisation, in some cases to critical levels. For example, humanity is currently exhausting its stock of easily recoverable coal, oil and gas, the sources of compressed, portable energy that have facilitated the industrial revolution and modern civilisation. Future generations will not have as easy access to these stocks, and in this way at least their options will be reduced. Humans are also exhausting and polluting stocks of easily available fresh water including that in aquifers. Fertile soil, fish stocks, biodiversity, ecosystems, pollution "sinks" and many other environmental global public goods are also in decline. The human impact on these resources is of such a magnitude that many aspects of the Earth's agricultural, biological and even industrial productivity may be compromised. This compromise is likely to occur at a time when the human population is greater than it currently is. In other words, the per capita production of desirable goods may decline in future, and this could trigger feedback cycles that further reduce well being and increase conflict.

Therefore, the growth of this resource consumption must be slowed and stabilised as soon as possible. This requires radical changes in the attitude and lifestyle of affluent populations to reduce the ecological footprint of wealthy consumers. As well, the increase in global population must be slowed. Population control is a complex and sensitive issue, thus multi-pronged, sustainable and equitable strategies are required. Such strategies include increasing literacy rates and the rights of women, fairer trade, and a campaign of hope that seeks to reduce inequality between nations and populations.

The population of Australia

The population of Australia is 20 million. Debate concerning the optimum size, rate of change, and environmental and social effects of the Australian population reflects opinion, values, fears, research findings and technology as well as the perception of external economic, political, environmental and military factors. The direction and effectiveness of official policy regarding these issues are a consequence of the strength of the various lobby groups within Australian society, including from its elite political leadership. Those favouring an increase in population point to national security, economic growth, the aging population and likely technological advances that will help support more people. Those favouring a stabilisation or decrease in population point to the fragile nature of the Australian environment, its lack of water (especially in its temperate zone), increasing evidence of land degradation and the assertion that economic "growth" even if attained does not guarantee greater contentment.

Sustainability

For the purpose of developing a population policy for Australia, the meaning of sustainability must be clarified. The best-known definition of sustainability comes from the report *Our Common Future*. This argued "humanity has the ability to make development sustainable - to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition is flawed by the inclusion of ambiguous terms such as "needs". The world lacks the resources to provide consumption levels similar to that of North America and Australia for the entire global population. Despite claims repeatedly made by political elites that free trade and free markets will one day lead to a utopia in which such bountiful consumption for all will occur there is little evidence that policy makers are serious about achieving these goals. The number of people who are extremely poor, and who lack adequate food, sanitation, and clean water, is far in excess of the global population a century ago. There is little chance of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Any chance of increasing average global consumption levels to Australian levels would fail long before it could be realised, because of ecosystem damage, including from climate change. But even Australian-levels of consumptions for *half* the global population would probably be ecologically catastrophic.

Enhanced consumption for all – to Australian levels – is impossible on ecological grounds in the foreseeable future. However, explicitly denying affluence to billions of fellow humans is not only hypocritical (which reader would happily abandon the privileges of affluence?) but may be dangerous. Neo-colonialism, exclusion, inequality, resentment and frustration are increasingly recognised as root causes of terrorism; and any policy that explicitly denies development for purportedly environmental reasons will simply fuel this resentment. Of course, the denial of global development for environmental reasons is not official policy. Instead, there is complacency among the elite in part because current global economic policies are dimly understood – despite the rhetoric mentioned above which claims to generate the opposite result – as effective ways that ensure a low ecological footprint for billions of people for the foreseeable future. Complacency also occurs because economists and those with the greatest political influence remain stubbornly and extraordinarily poorly informed about the environmental costs that the global economy has already incurred, even though these costs and risks are becoming rapidly more apparent to ordinary people.

The Human Titanic

The world at present can be characterised as like the ocean liner, the Titanic, on direct course with an iceberg. At the best case, civilisation may miss the iceberg. Doctors for the Environment Australia does not argue that collision is inevitable, even if there is little conscious effort to change course. It is possible that the current strong-arm tactics that characterise the global world order could intensify, and succeed in maintaining order aboard this liner for at least a century. It is also possible that it could take longer than a century to reach the iceberg. A kind of "fortress world" could evolve, where billions of poor people living outside the walls experience varying degrees of barbarism. The walls of this fortress would enclose and protect the living standards of a population of perhaps one billion people, whose consumption levels would be far higher than among the barbarians. The walls would be guarded

coastlines and material fences and walls. They would also be electronic, cultural and linguistic. They would primarily be defended by sentinels recruited from among the barbarian populations, lured by the promise of escape to some kind of order. Even within the walls there would be enclaves, where servants and attendants tend an inner elite. At the best case, collision with the iceberg (if it ever comes) might mean an uncomfortable night in a life raft for these elites.

The current world is already a little like this. However, at present, tourists from the elite world are still able to (more or less) safely tour outside their walls. Although Australia has largely rescinded its erstwhile noble obligation to shelter genuine refugees fleeing persecution it still admits a small number each year, including a few who manage to reach its shores unassisted. Flights into most Third World countries bearing First World tourists are still largely welcome. Surface to air missile attacks on these planes have occurred, but are still very rare, perhaps, in part because the technology of these missiles is still not very advanced. Many people in the rich world still harbour a degree of good will towards people of the Third World, and this is partially reciprocated. Hundreds of thousands of the brightest and best-skilled graduates from the Third World still migrate, temporarily or permanently, to the rich world. Although this contributes to a brain drain, it also facilitates a transfer of ideas and some capital between the two worlds. In other words, the walls that currently separate these worlds are porous and incomplete.

To some, the evolution of a fortress world may seem attractive. However, it is conceivable that such a world could become a nightmare, both within and outside the walls. Although vehemently disputed by the US and its allies, many analysts consider that a primary motivation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was to secure its oil supplies. Even one of the stated reasons for invasion (to bring democracy to Iraq) can be argued as justified by the greater security of access to Middle East oil that a democratic Iraq could offer. For almost sixty years, successive US governments have collaborated with one of the least democratic nations of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, in exchange for secure oil supplies. This policy was rendered untenable by the daring terrorist attack on the US homeland in 2001, organised by the Saudi dissident, Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden's hatred embraces the Saudi regime as well as the West. Clearly, the US is no longer as confident that its cosy relationship with the Saudis can be indefinitely maintained. The need to diversify US oil supply became urgent. The invasion of Iraq can thus be seen as a tactic by the global superpower to prolong its disproportionate access to fossil fuels. Tethered to the US disregard for the Kyoto Protocol, the Iraqi invasion vividly demonstrates a deep and dysfunctional disregard by the US for sustainability. Australia is clearly a supporter of this policy. To summarise, the policies of the US and Australia act to increase inequality and erode sustainability.

The War on Terror

The war on terror is now two years old. Terror attacks have become regular events, and have now occurred in many countries. Although no recent terrorist attack has been on the scale of the 9-11 event, it is clear that the terrorists are gaining. The US and its allies have done almost nothing to correct the root causes of international terrorism; indeed this topic is scarcely discussed. However, as population, deprivation and exclusion in the Third World increases, terrorist recruits are likely to become ever more plentiful. Weapons suitable for terrorists have never been as powerful, as

plentiful, or as cheap. It is not far-fetched to imagine that the continuation of these trends will lead to a fortress world that is far from pleasant, even for populations sheltered within the walls.

The war on terror serves as a distraction from an even more serious problem. The US and most of its allies, including both the Australian government and the main Australian opposition party, are in denial concerning climate change and the wider challenge of sustainability. To the extent that these issues surface at all in the mind of the Australian elite it is assumed – though never explicitly stated – that the best policy here is one of an aggressive Australian fortress, whose physical and verbal belligerence will be tolerated because US hegemony will continue to intimidate any population resentful of Australian selfishness.

Doctors for the Environment Australia argues that this policy is morally abhorrent. It is likely to lead to the greatest environmental damage. Finally, arguably, it is the most risky path strategically. For a start, it is unlikely that the US will extend indefinite protection to Australia without forcing greater Australian surrender of its economic, political, military and cultural sovereignty. This slippery slope is not only likely to see more Australian troops committed to defend US interests, but is also likely to inflame the resentment already held towards Australia by countries within its region. If China becomes a rival rather than an ally to the US, or if US power starts to wane then Australia may find that its current one-sided alliance is a liability.

Sometime this century, intensifying climate change, allied with diminishing oil supplies, could lead to a deterioration in food and political security across much of the Third World, including for large parts of South East and South Asia. Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh could disintegrate as nations, replaced instead by bands of militant thugs embroiled in barbarism. This could be the equivalent to Australia reaching the iceberg. What will happen? It seems unlikely that Australian resources, both of goodwill and economy will be able to assist these nations, which by then will be far more populous than today. At that time, a frightened Australian population will surely turn to the US for the protection that it hopes to have secured by decades of subservience and loyalty. But in such a world, defending Australia may not be an American priority.

What is the optimum Australian population?

In an ideal, population-stable world, there would be probably be little criticism were Australia to close its gates and restrict its population to barely more than its current level. The total fertility rate in Australia is already well below replacement level, at 1.7. (An average of 2.1 children per woman would be needed to maintain a stable population, were there no immigration). If the fertility rate continues at this rate (and migration – currently about 120,000 per annum net) is lowered or even stopped altogether), our population will peak at fewer than 25 million within thirty years, before declining (the population would continue to rise in the near future even if there was no immigration, because of population “inertia” – that is, because we are all living longer on average). In this scenario we could, perhaps, channel the energy of our gradually aging and static population towards preserving and restoring the environment that we and our forebears have already damaged. But this seems unrealistic for two main reasons.

Firstly, it is far from clear that such a population will express any more idealism, commitment or ability to genuinely reverse decades of environmental degradation than it has in the recent past. Settling into our collective arm chairs and living as comfortably as we can from the remnants of the Australian environment as it gradually runs down seems far more likely. Secondly, and far more importantly, we do not live in such a population-stable world. Though uncertain, it is highly plausible that future adverse environmental and ecological limits will increasingly bite into the living standards of the still-expanding populations of the Third World. While few countries in the Third World currently possess the means to threaten Australia militarily, a "fortress Australia" policy that, at the same time, seeks primarily to restore what is already – by global standards – an extraordinarily well-endowed environment **on per capita terms** will undoubtedly earn resentment and contempt, as has been stated above.

At the very least then, any fortification of Australia needs to be matched by a much greater outreach to our neighbours. Evidence that this may be being belatedly recognised is provided by the Australian government's benign but vigorous engagement in the stabilisation of the Solomon Islands and the strengthening of policing in Papua New Guinea. Also Australian expertise could, and we argue should, be used to foster "technological leapfrogging", especially in China, India, and Indonesia.

The population of Melanesia is trivial by global standards, and yet the Australian involvement in the Solomon Islands has not been a trivial expense. While few people consider the worst case scenario sketched above as even remotely plausible, there is unease concerning the future political and economic stability of Melanesia and Indonesia. Simply to respond to these potential threats, most politicians, business leaders, economists and political scientists argue that Australia needs to substantially increase its population, to guarantee the future economy and military means to deter invasion and to intervene pre-emptively in unstable areas. Unfortunately, few of these advocates exhibit much understanding of environmental limits, whether in Australia, or abroad.

Australia's recent migrant intake has averaged a little over 100,000 per annum. This intake is markedly skewed towards highly skilled migrants (about 60%), who are in increasingly short supply on a global basis. This is likely to have harmful effects both here and abroad. It contributes to the brain drain, and also reduces the need to produce a highly educated "homegrown" labourforce. Debate and discussion within Australia of these topics is hampered by a paucity of good research, by mainstream assumptions that the Australian environmental absorptive capacity is at least 50 million (and the mainstream provides only the mildest advocacy for ways to enhance this capacity) and the risk that any discussion about migration will be labelled as racist. Although the broad population, as yet, is little concerned with the environmentally absorptive capacity of Australia there are clearly wide concerns about its socially absorptive capacity. It is important to recognise that climate change and environmental deterioration will bring severe stresses to all communities and socially cohesive communities may have the strength to withstand these

We recognise that for Doctors for the Environment Australia to propose a definitive solution to these dilemmas may seem pretentious. While the writers of this report

have some suggestions, they seem almost hopelessly beyond the reach of current policymakers. Essentially, we support policies by which Australians are encouraged, through price signals, to become genuinely more environmentally friendly. We also advocate that Australians become genuinely more involved in trying to solve rather than hide from the myriad problems of our geographical region. As recommended in our Climate Change policy www.dea.org.au we believe that the Australian government should ratify the Kyoto protocol and lobby for an urgent tightening of greenhouse gas emissions in the next round of these negotiations,

We recommend an increase in Australia's foreign aid budget from 0.23 to 1% of GNP, that is, an almost quadrupling of the current level (for comparison, Norway, Sweden and Holland also provide 1% GNP but the USA only 0.11%). We think, as well, that this aid needs to be delivered in ways that genuinely assist poor populations within the Third World. We also believe that Australia should at least double its intake of lesser-skilled immigrants and asylum seekers. Although we recognise that this will not appreciably reduce the queue of refugees, we believe this will have an important symbolic value, if combined with policies that genuinely promote leadership in the direction of sustainability. It will also have minimal impact on the Australian environment. We do not advocate a fully "open door" policy to environmental and economic refugees on a global basis. Instead, we must actively contribute to reducing the chance that large numbers of such refugees will arise, by promoting environmental sustainability, and by promoting a global demographic transition. We support research into the ecological footprint in each region and state in Australia for it is clear that there will be differing population carrying capacities. Indeed, we believe that ways need to be found to counter the concentration of the Australian population, especially in the Sydney basin and South east Queensland for present trends will increase unsustainability in these regions.

While a *precise* optimal population is impractical (and in any case would vary with resources, technology, and community aspirations and expectations) further research and consultation may be able to identify a plausible figure, albeit subject to a variation of five to ten percent. We recognise that some will see the identification of such a target as impractical, but we argue that failure to attempt this could support two undesirable interpretations. The first is that the concept of a suitable population for a given set of resources is either meaningless or hopelessly ambitious. But this is contrary to the whole thrust of this document. The second, more plausible interpretation is that it is simply too socially and political difficult to identify a target population. While this may be true, we believe it is actually in the national interest to broaden this debate, and that in so doing a consensus may emerge of an optimal future population. In this document we have declined to identify such a figure, because we are uncomfortable to speak for the entire Australian population. The task is also made less problematic because demographic factors, such as life expectancy, fertility and migration rates establish plausible upper and lower boundaries which can be calculated for the next few decades.

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Conclusions and recommendations

Doctors for the Environment Australia supports the development of a population policy based upon the above imperatives and in summary our policy platform is as follows

1. There is increasing evidence that the growth of the world's population is a key factor in a rapidly approaching unsustainability of human existence and therefore all national policies must recognise and act upon this likely scenario

2. Population policy in Australia must be based upon principles of environmental and social responsibility, for these are strongly related to human health and wellbeing

3. Population policy in Australia must take into account a deteriorating environment and the possibility of increased water scarcity, accentuated by climate change. In the long term Australia's present population of 20 million can only be sustained by Australians becoming much more environmentally aware and active, and by significantly reducing our ecological footprint. Price signals should be used to encourage environmental friendliness. Our policies must support national, regional and global measures to alleviate environmental problems, for example ratification and strengthening of the Kyoto agreement

4 A globalised world confers the need to live cooperatively with our neighbours. To reduce the risk of regional instability Australia needs to increase its foreign aid to at least 1% of GNP to assist poor populations and to improve education and encourage democracy in our region. Australia should continue to develop its regional leadership in these matters and to increase the effectiveness of its aid.

5. Government must promote research on the ecological footprint in different regions of Australia. Our optimal target population should be based upon this footprint so that we may be able to increase our population if we reduce our footprint and vice versa. We believe that this target may have to be modified by humanitarian imperatives. For example Australia should be prepared to resettle Pacific Islanders if their homelands are inundated by rising sea levels.

6 Population considerations must be embraced in all economic planning decisions rather than use population increase as a means of engineering economic growth. To this end, it is vital that state and Federal governments establish Ministries of Sustainability with a Minister of high cabinet ranking

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