

# DOES AUSTRALIA NEED A FORMAL POPULATION POLICY?

## **Introduction**

There are two policy position extremes. At one is a comprehensive formal policy which includes targets for an ultimate stable population and an aggregate rate of growth, targets for demographic composition in terms of age distribution, educational level (or even skill groups) and other discriminators and plans for the location of population growth.

At the other extreme is a policy of non-intervention meaning no immigration controls. In addition, neutralisation of other policies that influence fecundity positively or negatively might be called for.

Clearly there are many options between these extremes. Australia has no formal population policy. It does have a range of policies which have an impact on the fecundity of the population e.g. fecundity might be higher or lower depending on the level of transfers to people with children either direct or through various services such as education. Government also limits population growth and influences demographic composition by immigration controls. (This even goes as far as discriminating in terms of health status for example.) But these interventions do not seem to be informed by any long-term plan and possibly not substantially by any medium-term thinking. Thus, although population growth rates and demographic composition are affected by a range of collective interventions they do not amount to a *de facto* policy of any coherence. Nevertheless it is clear that, in effect, Australia falls between the two policy position extremes.

## **The Issues**

On its face, a most basic issue for any community seems to be with how many other human beings it wishes to share its land and associated resources and one might imagine that communities would readily determine comprehensive policies accordingly. But development of such policies is philosophically and socio-economically far from straightforward.

An extreme position might be that no concern for future generations need be had and that maximisation of the welfare of people, or indeed some people, presently living is all that should concern us. I shall, however, adopt the assumption that the

vast majority of human beings would wish the planet to be able to sustain human life for as far into the future as possible is relatively uncontroversial. (Perhaps this means until the sun goes supernova, perhaps for longer given unimaginable advances in science and technology.) Beyond this, however, there are doubtless many views with substantial following on the kind of world one might wish future generations of human beings or of human and other beings to be able to enjoy. One might be that a world with the maximum human population sustainable at subsistence level would be acceptable. A very different view might be that a world with a much smaller human population than at present, providing much greater opportunity for other species is desirable.

Where the most popular view lies between the extremes seems difficult to judge. In an ideal world a person with a philosophy embracing an anthropocentric and internationally egalitarian worldview might favour some global democratic process to develop world population policy. A person whose philosophy embraced a biocentric worldview would presumably like to see a process that recognised rights of non-human beings and took them into account.

Just how an individual nation should ideally approach the development of a national population policy in isolation seems vexed indeed, as whether the policy is appropriate seems, in significant measure, dependant on the course the rest of the world takes. In this arena, an approach based on national sovereignty would seem to be quite unrealistic. It seems arguable that no nation has a unilateral right to determine its population level, and, further, limitations should operate on its rights to use its territory in general both from the point of view that it is not insulated from the biosphere at large and that there is a sense in which a trust exists in relation to its territory in respect of all the world's people and indeed other beings.

Australia is perhaps in a relatively difficult position philosophically. Most other nations have long since passed the human per capita natural resource endowment of Australia, (especially in terms of space, but even water) long before questions of sustainability were taken very seriously, long before notions of intrinsic value in non-human life were much argued and indeed perhaps before much thought was given to global equity as between human communities.

Unlike most other nations Australia has the option of allowing or encouraging considerable additional population growth (probably largely by means of immigration). Theoretically it could aim for a population of multiple hundreds of

millions with a density and quality of life similar to the more populace European nations for example, by developing an economy based on export of secondary and tertiary (and perhaps quaternary) produce and net import of primary produce. This would mean relinquishing food and other natural resource security and Australia's fortunes would be rather more dependant on the continuing capacity of the rest of the world to trade basic resources for more sophisticated product or product more in the category of necessities for product more in the category of luxuries.

Alternatively, also unlike most other nations, Australia could aim for population stabilisation in the next few decades and retain an almost uniquely low population density and high per capita natural resource level. As the House of Representatives Committee on Long-Term Strategies opines, "Ultimately, Australia's 'carrying capacity' is a function of choices, not environmental constraints..." (House of Representatives Committee on Long-Term Strategies, 1995).

The notion of carrying capacity of any given area makes sense for an ecosystem or ecosystems in which the member species rely critically on resources available within that area. Homo sapiens, though, seems to a special case. Already for many populations of our species resources are imported or technology has been developed to overcome resource problems.

It would seem, however, that the interplay of global environmental constraints and the pressures of the global human population could well, dictate an upper population level for Australia less than the choice that some Australians might make.

A population target on its own is of limited value. What must be coupled with it is a per capita environmental impact target. This means that, for example, with the right policies, at a range of population levels above the present, we could enjoy the particular qualities of an environment with a lower human impact on its ecology and even expanded total wilderness areas than we have at present and the rights of non-human life, that some of us recognise, could be better met.

In addition, a particular level could be pursued with differing impacts on people in other nations depending on policies adopted. Steps could be taken to reduce the fecundity of the incumbent population in a manner generally seen as quite ethical by various incentives and relatively greater immigration could occur. It is argued that bringing people from poorer nations to Australia is a less effective way of improving the global equity of human welfare than aid to communities in situ. But it does not

seem to be an either/or choice. It seems arguable that, rather than selectively permitting immigration of the advantaged of other countries, as appears to be the case under the business immigration scheme for example, and so taking skill from them, countries like Australia could, more altruistically, bring into their communities people whose opportunities in their own countries are limited.

Other things being equal, the net global environmental impact of a shift of population from less industrialised countries to more industrialised countries seems very likely to be negative assuming that immigrants acquire the resource usage behaviour of their adopted countries. But, countries like Australia could be expected to limit their resource usage to absolute levels regardless of population growth.

### **The Basis of Policy Formation**

The forgoing discussion suggests that, in broad terms, one might choose amongst the following in developing the basic aims of a population policy:

1. the highest possible aggregate welfare or utility of the human population of Australia?
2. (a) justice amongst the human population of Australia, perhaps also across generations, or  
(b) between Australians and the rest of humanity?
3. (a) justice as between humans and other species and the environment in general in Australia, or  
(b) in the world at large?

Consideration of justice seems to come down to a question of conceptions and levels. There are various conceptions of justice, (egalitarian, utilitarian, Rawlsian) with substantial philosophical support. A comprehensive discussion of the issues with which a population policy must deal would require an explicit argument in favour of one or another, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

There would appear to be three levels at which justice might operate:

- Intra-specific national
- Intra-specific international
- Inter-specific international

How one makes a choice amongst these levels or determines a ranking of them depends on one's views on rights of dominion - dominion of a group of people over an area of the globe or dominion of people over the globe. Does a person or group of people have a right to possess and dispose of, as they wish, any land or other entity, living or non-living, they control? Some might say people only have a right to **be** what they **are**, but a difficulty arises if what they **have** is **essential** to what they **are**.

The Report of the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council (1992) steps past the basic philosophical process and opines that "well-being for Australia" is the "proper purpose of any population policy" and defines well-being in terms of four national goals; "economic progress", "ecological integrity", "social justice" and "responsible international involvement". Notwithstanding the clearly expressed concerns for non-human and non-Australian interests its position could be characterised as falling within the anthropocentric and nationalistic paradigms. It does not argue its way into these paradigms. As a government committee it was perhaps being soundly politically realistic and more fundamental consideration of purposes and goals must be left to academe.

### **The Policy Options**

The essential options appear to be

- Non-intervention
- Regulation of aggregate growth
- Regulation of growth of particular demographic categories
- Regulation of the location of population growth
- Determination of an ultimate stable population target

### **Non-intervention**

The option of leaving population growth to the blind and insensate forces of the market seems to be accorded little merit. The Report of the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council (1992) did not consider it. The picture painted by Charles Stahl's paper "International Migration in the Asia Pacific Region and Its Implications for Australia" (National Population Council, 1992b) makes it clear that growth of Australia's population would accelerate very rapidly indeed with no immigration controls. Presumably price levels for land and other resources would, in due course limit immigration, but would this be at a level such that the consequences were acceptable to the Australian community? In other words would prices reflect

externalities? Modelling the answer would be interesting, but it seems to be accepted that it would be resoundingly negative. In part this would presumably be because individuals would not take account of collective interests and in part because of the inadequacy of the “telescopic faculty” of market participants or the ability to see longer-term consequences.

It is conceivable that unwanted effects of the market could be mitigated by the limited intervention of assigning property rights to various resources. However, by definition, this can only operate in respect of entities that have some human instrumental value. It cannot operate to involve entities that are considered to be valuable in and of themselves that is are considered intrinsically valuable.

### **Regulation of aggregate growth**

There would seem to be ample reasons for intervening to regulate the aggregate growth of the population in Australia regardless of the policy aims chosen. For example the Report of the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council (1992) notes research that suggests that productivity growth varies positively with population growth rates up to about 1.3%, but negatively for higher rates. The report also suggests that regulated and predictable growth rates are helpful in terms of optimising public and private investment especially in infrastructure development. In addition it mitigates the difficulties associated with planning lags and lead times in many public and private enterprises including especially those involved with natural resource management and human capital development.

Various ethical instruments might be used to influence fecundity of the resident population their use is generally tightly linked to socio-political factors which makes their employment in the service of population policy difficult. Clearly no consideration could be given to curbing endeavours to increase longevity. The only significant instrument available for regulation of population growth is therefore immigration.

### **Regulation of growth of particular demographic categories**

Many additional uncertainties can be reduced if the demographic characteristics of the population can be anticipated allowing various efficiencies to be achieved. While demographic predictions based on fecundity and mortality of the resident population can be made, if the demographics of immigrants are left to the vagaries of the politics of the day these predictions are subject to significant unquantifiable variation.

This kind of regulation has implications for other aspects of economic performance besides improving the efficiency of supply of needs and wants if the proportion of the population with relatively higher levels of productive capacity can be increased.

Demographic characteristics can be thought of as those that are birth-given and those that are acquired. In respect of the resident population prevailing ethics permit only a very limited interference with the former, but it seems we are prepared to discriminate amongst potential immigrants on the basis of health status, which may be birth-given, and age. We employ extensive measures to alter the acquired characteristics of the resident population, e.g. to improve health status and to improve education and skill levels and though these are largely driven by other considerations they could be usefully informed by a population policy.

In respect of immigrants, again, we seem to have little compunction in selecting out those with less favourable acquired characteristics in terms of health status, education, skill and indeed wealth. Some individuals may not benefit from being transplanted into a society to which they cannot adjust, but more philosophical consciousness in this area seems warranted.

### **Regulation of the location population growth**

Relocation of population growth has the potential to mitigate many of the immediate and mid-term negative effects in terms of economic efficiency, social justice and the environment. The efficiency of infrastructure provision in the fringe growth areas of Sydney, for example, compares significantly unfavourably with that of provision in regional centres, which, due to low growth, flat or declining populations, have under-utilised infrastructure.

Environmental effects of human population growth are not homogenous so relocation policies can be ecologically optimising. Relocation cannot be a significant ecological instrument, however, because total resource usage profiles in different geographical locations do not vary significantly.

### **Determination of an ultimate stable population target**

The Report of the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council (1992) and the House of Representatives Committee on Long-Term Strategies

(1995) do not favour determination, at least at this time, of an ultimate stable population target. There are large imponderables in terms of population location, consumption patterns, technological change and especially international developments that could make any figure settled on at this time quite inappropriate.

## **Conclusion**

This writer thinks much more needs to be done to develop, articulate and publicly debate the philosophical reasoning to underpin a sound population policy. In addition sound policy would benefit significantly from development of the ideas advanced on integration of theoretical and empirical work on human well being and ecological economics by Steve Dodds (Dodds, 1995) rather than relying on assumptions about the correlation between measures such as GDP and well being.

However, it seems clear that a range of benefits would flow from adoption of an explicit formal population policy. Reduced uncertainties about growth rates, demographic characteristics and the location of growth would render many economic, social and environmental factors more manageable. Perhaps insofar as there are good macro-economic management reasons in favour of reducing uncertainties in monetary policy by insulating the Reserve Bank's decisions from the politics of the day there are good reasons for similarly distancing population policy from contemporary politics.

Development of a comprehensive policy however would be a major undertaking not least because of the co-ordination complexities involved within and between levels of government. Once achieved, there would need to be a mechanism for regular review of the policy sophisticated enough to ensure currency, in particular to allow it to reflect ongoing change in ethical values, but to prevent political opportunism.



## References

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