

## NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF

Let me get a few things off my chest before coming to Ian Lowe's excellent new book on population policy.

I have had a negative view of the politics of population policy in Australia since spending half of 1994 on secondment from CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) to the House of Representatives Long Term Strategies Committee chaired by Barry Jones. I wrote a draft report for that Committee's inquiry into 'Australia's Population Carrying Capacity' (the Jones Inquiry) and was less than impressed by the Committee's unwillingness to make firm recommendations. And I have an equally negative view of the way in which population policy has been and continues to be debated in public fora in Australia. To wit, partisan groups aggressively present one-sided arguments for policy positions which, directly or indirectly, stand to favour their own interests. Fancy that Mandy.

It was in protest against government timidity and dishonest public 'debate' that I wrote a book which concluded that a sensible population policy for Australia would be to aim at stabilising the population within a generation or so and that this was quite feasible if net immigration of something below about 50 000 a year (say 100 000 migrants in gross terms) could be maintained.<sup>1</sup> Population would then more-or-less stabilise somewhere between 19 and 23 million (depending on actual immigration) sometime before 2050. To get to that conclusion I examined, as disinterestedly, as honestly as I could, all the environmental, economic and social arguments I could find both for and against a much larger population. I did have a prior predisposition in favour of a stable population but I bent over backwards to discount my own prejudices.

In the years since writing that book, the population horse has bolted. Despite the Australian community continuing to be strongly in favour of low immigration and hence low population growth, political parties and business interests have quietly succeeded in growing the population by 1-2 per cent a year. Backed by political and media power, their sloganeering and short-term self-interest have largely gone unchallenged. Rational discussion of the population issue remains minimal. Only once, in 2010, when Prime Minister Rudd enthused publicly about a projection of 36 million Australians by 2050 was there anything like community outrage. Rudd's successor, Prime Minister Gillard, hosed the outrage down by setting up an inquiry into how to achieve a 'sustainable population', an inquiry which, in the blink of an eye, produced a 150 page masterpiece of glossy spin and bullshit

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<sup>1</sup> Cocks, D., *People Policy: Australia's Population Choices*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 1996

Talk about groundhog day. Very little has changed in 20 years. Yes, migrant intakes have crept up and attitudes towards 'legitimate' migration have softened somewhat even as attitudes towards asylum seekers have hardened. But the same arguments for and against a larger population continue to be trotted out by the same protagonists. I have long been told by people on both sides of this confrontation that the only way to 'win' is to be prepared to go round and round the block, shouting potted messages louder than your opponents. Eventually (sic), public opinion will decisively tip one way or the other and articulated policy will follow. It was when I realised I was not going to change this grotesque parody of policy debate with my ever-so-reasonable writings that I turned my research interests elsewhere. Notwithstanding my own desertion, I am admiring of people like Bob Birrell, Kathy Betts, Mark O'Connor, Jenny Goldie, John Coulter and Bill Lines who have been willing to stay in the trenches and frustrate a growthist rout.

Enter left, Ian Lowe, a man I recently had occasion to refer to as 'the public face of science in Australia.' Wearing various hats, including President of the Australian Conservation Foundation and Patron of Sustainable Population Australia, Lowe has long been willing to argue for a policy of stabilising Australia's population sooner rather than later.

I would describe his new book, 'Bigger or Better?: Australia's Population Debate,'<sup>2</sup> as gently educational, a good book for a big-city commuter to pick up while stuck in the morning traffic, or an inner-city battery-human to browse after screwing in the earplugs, or a suburbanite who finds her favourite dog-walking spot is to be developed. It is a book for someone who senses that we already have too many people in Australia but would like to get the background facts and be convinced by the even-handed arguments of an honest expert. Lowe qualifies. Yes, he has a policy stance but the reader will feel that he's not being tricky when he sets out the demographic facts or the trends in natural resource depletion and degradation. He sprinkles his own experiences of habitat change through his narrative and, given his audience, that's a plus, as is his decision to limit references and datasets. He's no economist but you don't have to be to appreciate the paucity of evidence for the impact of population growth on GDP (Yes, I know) *per capita*.

I would have liked to have seen a stronger presentation of the opportunity costs of settling migrants, not so much in terms of infrastructure costs per migrant settled, but in the startling aggregate terms identified by the likes of Queensland University's Jane O'Sullivan.<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan estimates that, in 2010-11, a barbecue-stopping 9.6 per cent of GDP was diverted into providing durable assets and skilled service personnel to the extra 1.4 per cent of people Australia acquired in that year. No wonder 'Topsy' Queensland's public debt quadrupled from \$21 billion in 2004 to \$85 billion in 2011. Lester Thurow's comparable 1986 calculation for USA was that equivalently servicing a population increment of one per cent a year would keep soaking up 12.5

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<sup>2</sup> Lowe, I., *Bigger or Better?: Australia's Population Debate*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2012

<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan, J., The Burden Of Durable Asset Acquisition In Growing Populations, *Econ. Affairs* 32(1), 2012, 31-37

per cent of GDP!<sup>4</sup> It's the *rate* of change that determines the short-term burden of population growth.

And, on another judgement call, is 'Bigger or Better?' scary enough? Given even a modest possibility that we are caught in a social trap, an irreversible shuffle into diminished quality of life, a boiling frog moment, is Ian Lowe too bloody reasonable? He covers all the usual arguments but sometimes he doesn't drive home just how nasty some of the consequences of rapid growth stand to be. His readers need to be frightened but because we know that fear blocks people's ears and evokes rejection, the challenge is to stop just short of telling them we are probably entering Orwell's Room 101.

OK, given what he set out to do, Ian has done a good job and I congratulate him. Why don't we see equally well-argued books from 'growthists'? Two reasons. One is that, when you strip out short-term self-interest, the arguments for strong population growth are weak. The second is that if it doesn't itch, don't scratch. The ship of state, be it painted pink or blue, has been boarded by freebooters who have told the bridge to take on more passengers (as you see, my colour is purple). Or, if you are getting what you want, don't rock the boat.

Being serious, will this book have political impact? Will it produce more Kelvin Thompsons, he being the only federal M.P. to regularly and publicly argue for population stabilisation? Does it suggest a plausible scenario of how government policy might change to reflect the will of the people? It is not a criticism but both answers are No.

If we are to find a way forward, we have to ask why stabilising population ASAP is not and never has been federal government policy. Historically, both post-Federation and after World War 2, the argument which convinced most people was the country's need to reach a population level at which our society would be viable, culturally and militarily. More recently, the simplest explanation, to borrow from Marx, is that the state is the executive committee of the governing class, the business class in our case, and population growth is what business wants.

Let's be more generous and postulate other reasons why the major parties genuinely believe that strong population growth is in the national interest. Or, and this is what opens the door to vested interests, why they think it would be unwise to have an explicit population policy (which we don't). I will try to be empathetic.

There are two reasons why politicians dislike policies with measurable goals. One is that it removes some of the discretionary power which many find enjoyable *per se* and which is supposedly needed to retain 'flexibility.' The second is that policies with clear goals have to be defended with clear reasoning rather than bullshit. Most polities, like most people, are not good at thinking an argument through, and bullshit, while usually intentionally deceptive, may sometimes be the best they can manage. For example, some get caught up with red herrings like: we can *cope* with population growth; migrants have contributed a lot to Australia; a big Australia could still feed itself; it is impossible to identify an 'optimal' population; we don't want a shrinking population.

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<sup>4</sup> Thurow, L. Why the Ultimate Size of the World's Population Doesn't Matter, *Technology Review*, 89, 6, 22 and 29, 1986.

Demonstratively, people like Ian Lowe and myself vastly overrate the power of a good argument to change beliefs. Everyone (over thirty?) has an aversion to changing beliefs, especially those which are cornerstones of one's world view. Ask Thomas Kuhn.<sup>5</sup> People acquire beliefs, and an emotional attachment to them, through personal experience and social conditioning.

It was only after about 1968, towards the end of Australia's post-war 'golden age,' that the whole basis of Australia's post-war immigration program began to be questioned. Reasons for emerging concern included the prospects of US-style 'congestion' and the recognition that 'Australia is environmentally a very vulnerable country that requires very careful nursing by a limited population, if that environment is not to be destroyed.'<sup>6</sup> And it was from the mid-seventies, following Keynes' sacking, that the rise of economic rationalism and economistic thinking paved the way for an increasing dominance of the policy agenda by the business class, the shock troops of the new order. It took thirty years, culminating in the slowing of the world economy in 2007, for economic rationalism to eventually lose its gloss.

But life was good for middle Australia over the decades of population and GDP growth. Post hoc ergo propter hoc. For tough-minded empiricists with limited imagination, the message has remained clear: When you're on a good thing, stick to it. Here is the social conditioning that Lowe is up against---a society and a political class that still largely believes, on the basis of past experience, that his title is a category error: bigger has proved to be better, be it the population or the economy.

So, when might it become blindingly obvious that, despite pressure from vested interests, policies which grow energy use ( the driver of both economic growth and environmental degradation) and population must be abandoned. More and more people can hear the clock striking thirteen as the negative externalities accompanying both population growth and economic growth begin to bite---loss of amenity and environmental resources on the one hand and the social-coherence and quality-of-life costs of income inequality on the other. Recent research is showing that GDP growth and increasing income inequality are joined at the hip and that inequality corrupts society in major and surprising ways.<sup>7</sup> In a society where empiricists vastly outnumber tender-minded rationalists (those willing to think ahead) it is only pain that will trigger a cultural transformation, a perelom, a flip in mass consciousness as occurred in the Soviet Union in 1989. That is what Ian Lowe and his fellow-stablists

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<sup>5</sup> Kuhn, T.S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970..

<sup>6</sup> Borrie, W.D., *Population Policy in Australia: A Preliminary Review*, Australia's Population and the Future, Working paper No. 20, National Population Inquiry, Canberra, c1973

<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson, R.G., and Pickett, K.E., *Income Inequality and Social Dysfunction*, *Annual. Rev. Sociol.*, Vol.35, pp 493–511, 2009

will have to wait for. Let us hope, to leave you with Hegel's foreboding metaphor, that the owl of Minerva flies before dusk this time<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nineteenth-century philosopher G.W.F. Hegel famously noted that "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk"—meaning that philosophy comes to understand a historical condition just as it passes away.