

AUSTRALIA CONSIDERS A POPULATION POLICY: ANY LESSONS FOR A DRIFTING USA?

An NPG Forum Paper
By David Simcox

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia has created a Ministry of Sustainable Population and is nearing the end of a year-long high-level review of its population strategy. These initiatives since 2009 came in the midst of public concerns about increasing urban congestion and about 2009 demographic projections showing population growing by more than 60 percent by 2050 – to 35 million. The preliminary findings from the review, principally an Issues Paper by the Population Minister, rejects population stability as a goal and implies continued acceptance of high immigration.

Australia's preference for the population *status quo* and for economic growth over environmental and resource preservation matches U.S. experience in population policy, chiefly the 1972 Rockefeller Commission on Population growth and the 1993 President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD). The recommendations of both bodies that the U.S. move toward a stable population were rejected or ignored by top policy makers. There are numerous common factors in the shared aversion of the two countries toward population policy and in the stratagems of their policy makers for ignoring aggregate population growth.

Australia and the U.S have striking cultural and political similarities. As market-economy democracies peopled by European settlers and immigrants, they share a *laissez faire* attitude toward population and immigration, a resistance to ‘social engineering,’ and a love of bigness. Particularly noticeable in the current Australian experience is an optimism nourished by powerful business sectors that population growth itself will bring the innovation, energy and added resources necessary to ensure prosperity while overcoming resource depletion, congestion and environmental degradation. This “growth-will-pay-for-itself” assertion has immense appeal to democratic politicians everywhere.

Despite its likely undramatic outcome, the Australian debate provides some useful ideas for keeping population growth in the public eye, most notably the high-level population review itself and the creation of a Ministry of Sustainable Population. The U.S. would be well served 1) by holding a similar review of population policy, and repeating it at five-year intervals; and 2) by creating high-level permanent organizations within the White House, major executive branch agencies, and in both houses of Congress to monitor population growth and its consequences based on agreed indicators.

Can Australia, a nation of 23 million people occupying nearly three million square miles, really have a population problem? Or is Australia in the early stages of replicating the American experience of overpopulating a once empty continent through high fertility and then higher immigration?

Many Australians are skeptical that lots of room equates to lots of resources to support huge populations. The present prime minister of the ruling Labor Party thinks that sustainability must be the first goal of population policy – though consensus on just what sustainability demands is elusive.

American conservationists have been confounded for more than a century by the same fallacy that space means carrying capacity. A near caricature of that fallacy is the supposedly reassuring argument that the entire U.S. population would fit comfortably into the state of Texas.¹ The cornucopians who make this claim, however, conveniently ignore that most of the space for water, forests, farm lands, mines and natural areas for biodiversity and recreation for the support of this wall-to-wall population would have to be found beyond that state's borders and abroad.

In part because of public concerns, Australia's Labor Government is now well along on high-level, systematic deliberations of a strategy for population sustainability, to culminate later in 2011 in public and parliamentary discussions of goals and strategies. Few industrial democracies of late are so willing to take on this taboo-laden issue.

FOUR DECADES OF U.S. DENIAL

No such similar high-level assessment is in sight for the U.S. Americans concerned about their nation's reluctance to address its population future will view Australia's experiment with curiosity, even admiration.

The U.S. is now careening mindlessly toward a population near 430 million by mid-century. It adds 2.7 million people a year, including some 1.3 million immigrants – even in times of high unemployment. Yet it has no explicit population policy. And it prefers to do without any established mechanism in either the executive or legislative branch for regularly tracking the environmental, social and economic effects of population size, distribution and composition

Last year, 2010, marked the fortieth anniversary of America's only official effort to devise an explicit

population policy, the opening in 1970 of the congressionally-chartered Rockefeller Commission on Population and the American Future. By 1970 the U.S. had already grown to 204 million, a magnitude that a number of ecologists and conservation biologists at that time already considered unsustainable.² After two years of studies and hearings, Rockefeller's 1972 bold recommendations that the country plan for a stable population were summarily rejected by President Richard Nixon and ignored by Congress.³

Then in 1993 President Bill Clinton formed by executive order an advisory group, a "President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD)," with a task force on population and consumption. Echoing Rockefeller, PCSD concluded that one of the most important steps toward sustainability was prompt stabilization of the U.S. population. The PCSD was an advisory body only. There was no organized follow-up in either the executive or legislative branches to move toward this goal.

PUBLIC UNEASE DOWN UNDER ABOUT "BIG AUSTRALIA"

Now, four decades after Rockefeller and seventeen years after PCSD, many Australians are concerned about emulating America's indifference to the risks of population growth. A triggering event for Australia's consideration of a population strategy was the Treasury Ministry's release in 2009 of updated projections that the country was on a demographic track that would take it from nearly 23 million to nearly 36 million by 2050, fueled by a rise in fertility to near replacement and a surge in net overseas migration (NOM) to an average 220 thousand a year in the late 2000s.⁴ The country is growing at 1.3 percent annually, the fastest rate of any developed country.

These numbers may seem modest by American standards. But scaled up to the size of the US they would be comparable to an American population increase of 195 million by mid-century (compared to 110 million actually projected) and immigration of three million yearly – more than twice the present U.S. level. Australia already has a foreign-born population approaching 27 percent, more than twice the percentage of the U.S.

Credit the Australian population strategy review at least for timeliness. It addresses population growth before it exceeds sustainable limits or becomes a self-

nourishing and deeply embedded social expectation as it has in the U.S. Australia, moreover, may still have some cushion of resources for modest population growth, though even that cushion may be erased by global environmental trends, such as climate change. The per capita environmental footprint of Australians is still less than half the continent's per capita biocapacity (Americans' individual footprint now exceeds the per capita availability of U.S. biocapacity by 100 percent.)⁵ Under present consumption and growth rates, Australia's presently surplus biocapacity would become a deficit in less than 60 years.

Water is the Achilles heel of the country's resource base. One third of the country is utterly arid, and one third is semi-arid. Rainfall averages nationally just under seven inches a year. (America's most arid state, Arizona, averages eight inches.) Nevertheless, the country's low density allows the "Big Australia" corporate growth machine to argue that rainfall per capita is among the world's most favorable. Applying the logic of this per capita metric, the arid and lightly populated American state of Wyoming, with just 600,000 people in its 98,000 square-mile expanse and an average statewide rainfall of just 13 inches, could be considered better watered than the nation's rainiest state, Louisiana.

Americans can grasp the extent of Australia's water deprivation by imagining that the arid regions of the Lower 48 commenced at the Appalachians instead of more than 1000 miles farther west at the 100th meridian. Agriculture claims half of Australia's available fresh water. With global warming expected to further complicate its hydrology, Australia has already experienced what some have called a "1000-year drought" through most of the 2000s. The flow of the major river system, the Murray-Darling, is as over-allocated as America's Colorado River.

Australia and the U.S. have a similar energy predicament. Australia's domestic production of petroleum peaked in 2000, leaving it now, like the U.S., increasingly dependent on imports, which will rise to two-thirds of total consumption by 2015. Transportation and farming are heavily dependent on oil. And like the U.S. it has an abundance of coal deposits and natural gas, with their huge potential for boosting carbon emissions. But the country has favorable conditions for renewables such as solar, wind and geothermal. Less than seven percent of Australia's land is arable (compared to 20 percent in the U.S.) and much of its

soil is thin and vulnerable to erosion, acidification, salinization and urban encroachment.

THE AUSTRALIAN DEBATE: ANY LESSONS FOR THE U.S. AND THE WORLD?

The U.S. and Australia have much in common as democratic, common law, free market countries populated by European settlement and steeped in the neoliberal ethos of perpetual economic and demographic growth and globalization. The colonization of both nations by European settlers and their progeny produced vast environmental destruction – deforestation and soil erosion, mass exterminations of wildlife, overgrazing, importation of destructive non-native species, toxic mining practices, water pollution and location of what would become major sprawling cities on the richest farm lands. Australia's relative scarcity of water, forests and stable soils has imbued it with a deeper concern for conservation than is found in the naturally richer U.S.

Comparing and contrasting Australia's current approach to population policy (they prefer the term "population strategy" and population "change" rather than population "growth.") with the largely futile U.S. attempts of 1970-72 and 1993 may give insight into the U.S.'s immobility on the population dilemma, and indeed that of other industrialized democratic nations.

Initially hailing Treasury's enlarged projections in 2009, Australia's then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd voiced a boosterist support for a "Big Australia." But stung by the intense surprise and concern in the Australian public over the huge numbers and the unexpected ballooning of the projections, Rudd backed off his endorsement and in early 2010 appointed a Minister for Population, Tony Burke.

RECONCILING PROSPERITY, LIVABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

In 2010, Rudd's successor, current Prime Minister Julia Gillard retitled Burke's cabinet post as Minister for Sustainable Population and questioned the wisdom of rushing toward a "Big Australia," but declined to specify population targets or limits. (Curiously, she did not include immigration in Burke's new portfolio.) Burke then directed the drafting of a population strategy for Australia and appointed three different panels of experts to define the issues and present advice.

The three panels completed and released their studies in December, 2010. The Minister drew selectively on those papers with his own overarching “Issues Paper.” The panels’ papers were carefully written and drew on an abundance of existing expert Australian social science and environmental research, though each has its particular flavor of advocacy of a predetermined view. The panels addressed the following domains of population strategy, though there was considerable overlap among them:

Panel 1, which considered “*Demographic Change and Livability*,” was headed by University Professor and demographic expert Graeme Hugo. A good deal of its discussion was the social, civic, urban, lifestyle and cultural impacts of population change

Panel 2, on “*Productivity and Prosperity*,” chaired by business leader and advocate Heather Ridout, reflected the issues as seen by the business, investor, employer and propertied classes.

Panel 3, on “*Sustainable Development*,” chaired by well known environmentalist and former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, considered the costs of high population growth and development in environmental damage and resource depletion, infrastructure burdens, and rising congestion.⁶

THE LIKELY OUTCOME: A “NO” TO POPULATION STABILIZATION

At this writing, the Australian population strategy review still must receive and address public input. But the Population Minister’s Issues Paper, which is likely to define the terms of the subsequent debate, does not portend any major changes in the country’s population *status quo*. Chances are good that if a similar national assessment of U.S. population strategy were being done now in recession-plagued America, it would produce a similar defense of the primacy of economic growth and the rewards of population growth and generous immigration, duly sweetened with solicitous but largely rhetorical gestures to the concerns of environmentalists and “Malthusians.”

The conclusions of the Rockefeller Commission and PCSD were bolder in one critical respect than the current Australian effort: they unequivocally recommended population stabilization. Minister Burke’s Issues Paper declines to specify population stability as a goal. It notes that: “since the 1970s

all population inquiries sponsored by Australian governments have rejected the notion of a population target or national carrying capacity” and “have avoided policy settings at the more ‘social engineering’ end of the scale. For example, in relation to family size”⁷ (The Rockefeller Commission’s recommendations for legal abortion, women’s rights, the two-child family, and sex and population education in the schools were, in their day, roundly scorned as “social engineering.” Devising a serious population policy without some “social engineering” is hard to imagine.)

Many of the arguments and their supporting evidence are similar to those aired in the Rockefeller Commission and in the four decades since of intellectual and political jousting between Malthusians and Cornucopians over U.S. immigration and population practices. The business community, dominating Panel 2, was considerably more assertive and better prepared in backing population growth and generous immigration, than were its American counterparts in Rockefeller or PCSD.⁸ But Panel 2’s arguments against population and immigration limits are strikingly similar in their generalized optimism and faith in technology to those now of American business and its cornucopian and libertarian allies.

For Panel 2, Australia’s water needs can be met with better planning, pricing, recycling and innovation. Similarly, urban sprawl and housing distress are a matter of better planning, elimination of stifling regulations on land use and the increased resources and investment that accompany population growth. For business, population growth and immigration are, not the cause of resource and environmental distress, but the solution to them, bringing the wealth that will fund the repair of environmental damage and modernization of infrastructure. This confidence, despite its shortage of supportive detail, was not questioned in the Minister’s Issues Paper.

Immigration, in the business view, also expands links abroad to new sources for foreign trade and investment and brings innovative and entrepreneurial new residents. Such arguments have an innate appeal to democratic politicians with their short time horizons and their need to deliver prosperity. This is even more appealing now in Australia, which is experiencing booming exports of minerals and natural gas to Asian partners, escaping the recession afflicting many countries.

Panel 3 (Sustainable Development) rejects the prevailing wisdom of the Issues Paper and declares that “population and sustainability are inextricably linked.” It finds no consistent relationship between population growth and economic progress, citing Germany and Switzerland as having growing economies and stable or shrinking populations

Consider what emerged as the preferred and more expedient view of carbon emissions. (Commendably, unlike a growing segment of U.S. political elites, most Australian leaders at least still believe climate change is real.) The Issue Paper confirms the government’s pledge to reduce carbon emissions, but echoes the finding of Panel 2 that . . .

population growth does not result in dramatic differences regarding the level of per capita reductions required to meet a specified carbon target. This is because projected population changes constitute a relatively small proportion of the total population.

This ignores the considerable cumulative population boost over time from immigrants and their post-migration children. Environment and population researchers Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy of Australia’s Monash University, relying on Treasury Ministry data and projections, point out that population growth will be responsible for 83 percent of the growth in emissions from 2000 to 2020.⁹ Similarly, U.S. projected population growth of 120 million or more from 2005 to mid-century will gravely imperil the ambitious emissions reductions pledged by the Obama administration (but rejected by Congress) -- reductions of 42 percent from the 2005 base year to 2030, and of 83 percent by 2050.¹⁰

SOME GOOD IDEAS FOR ADDRESSING POPULATION STRESS

Despite their pro-populationist leaning, the panels so far have produced some novel insights and ideas worth consideration by the U.S. First, the very willingness of Australians to create a population ministry and hold a high-level review of population at all sets a good international example. The Australian effort may not trigger real change now, but it raises the consciousness of the public, which keeps the issue alive and builds popular support for change.

The panels propose some institutional and

government structures that would keep population under regular scrutiny. Panel 3 on “Sustainable Development” and Panel 1 called for development of systematically monitored “indicators” for measuring population pressures, a proposal endorsed without elaboration by the Minister’s Issues Paper. Indicators could include:

- Water availability
- Declines in biodiversity, loss and fragmentation of habitat, and intrusion of non-native species
- Greenhouse gas emissions and climate change
- Urban encroachment
- Changes in fire patterns
- Unemployment
- Housing availability and affordability
- Infra-Structure deficits

A “Sustainability Commission” would monitor these and other indicators and require “Sustainability Impact Statements” in policy making. Panel 3 recommends oversight by a restored, independent National Population Council to take the long view, supported by an independent national research facility.

Among Rockefeller’s many bold recommendations was the creation of high level permanent population monitoring structures in the executive and legislative branches, comparable in mission to a Ministry of Sustainable Population. PCSD’s population and consumption task force recommended a national commission to report on changes in population distribution that affect sustainable development. To no avail: to this day, there is no explicit population policy and no permanent mechanisms for continuous monitoring of population in Washington’s vast executive and legislative bureaucracy.¹¹

MORE GOOD IDEAS: IMMIGRATION RESTRAINT

Rejecting the other panels’ preference for high immigration to offset aging and ease presumed labor shortages, Panel 3 recommends greater effort to meet labor needs by expanding labor force participation rates, particularly among the ageing, women and indigenous people. The ageing, the panel notes, live more sustainably and are healthier than in the past; in seeking workers the nation should focus on their contributions, not their chronological age. Panel 3 rejects the well-used argument that population

growth yields “economies of scale,” noting that the congestion coming from added numbers is one of the “diseconomies of scale.”

Panel 3 also recommends that Australia’s federal government exert greater control over immigration, abandoning the “market-driven” approach that has conceded much authority over admissions to major private sector interest groups, such as employers and universities. It advises the universities to stress quality of students over quantity and provide more of their services offshore.

Panel 3’s skepticism about high immigration puts it clearly in the minority within the constellation of experts working on the review. But with Australian fertility just below replacement, net overseas migration is the population driver. No slowing of population growth is likely without major reductions of intake. Most of Australia’s population panelists seem as indifferent to the gathering momentum of immigration to western countries as was the Rockefeller Commission in 1972. After considerable debate, that Commission could only recommend, with important Commission members dissenting, that immigration be frozen at its level of that time -- 400 thousand a year, and that employer sanctions be enacted to halt illegal immigration. Employer sanctions were not enacted for another thirteen years, and then ineffectively. Overall immigration to the U.S. is now three times its 1972 level.

Demographically, Australia now stands where the U.S. stood in 1850: a population of 23 million. U.S. growth from 23 million in 1850 to 76 million in 1900 -- in half a century, fed by high fertility and immigration stimulated by awards of lands, is a reminder of the awesome momentum immigration and population growth can gain under western governments that invite it and subsidize it.

AUSTRALIA AND THE U.S.: SHARED OBSTACLES TO POPULATION POLICY

Clearly, making population policy doesn’t come easy for democratic industrial nations. As the Rockefeller Commission’s report put it, “For historical reasons that no longer apply, this nation has an ideological addiction to growth.” Australia is equally addicted, having in common with the U.S. pro-natalist, pro-growth laws, attitudes, perceptions,

and institutions that have crystallized as into an unassailable cathedral of orthodoxy.

The history of both nations has given them the underlying outlook of “frontier societies” that struggled more than two centuries ago to populate vast land-rich and labor-short continents. The atavistic pull of high immigration persists in highly urbanized and (increasingly in the US case) labor-surplus societies. Nowhere is the contradiction more visible than in the U.S. where high immigration is accepted even during the most serious unemployment crisis in 75 years. Incredibly, many U.S. defenders of high immigration have gained support with their argument that even more migration is warranted now as an antidote to unemployment.¹²

Australia, with its immigration points system and weaker obsession with family reunification, and its more defensible borders, has been somewhat more adept in calibrating its flow of migrants to economic conditions. But that now seems to be changing as employer, ethnic, international education, and refugee pressure groups gain traction.

Australian scholar and former U.S. Population Council demographer Geoff McNicoll¹³, who was a consultant to the Rockefeller Commission, has perceptively identified and analyzed the barriers to population policy in Australia. He notes that fellow common-law countries, U.S and Canada, partake of most of Australia’s impediments. Most of those impediments were apparent in the political resistance to the processes and recommendations of Rockefeller. Other barriers have emerged or existing ones have increased their strength in the years since.

McNicoll claims that consistent public opposition to high immigration is usually neutralized by bipartisan support or at least acquiescence in the legislative bodies. Vociferous and determined ethnic, farm, religious and business lobbies have more clout with legislators on the specifics of immigration and population issues than does a skeptical but unmobilized public. Any observer of U.S. immigration history will recognize that syndrome. Further trammeling legislative action is the short time horizon of lawmakers, who tend to focus on their next election while the disruptions of excess growth are apparent only after decades.

Another major impediment is the inability of the political process to engage population growth as a discrete national concern in itself. Problems stemming from or aggravated by population growth have too often been segmented and addressed as narrow issues such as pricing distortions, unwise incentives, faulty urban and land use planning, and farm policy, permitting gun-shy policy makers to side-step the basic and more troublesome question of overall growth of numbers.

In this mindset, “longages” of people are more cautiously addressed as “shortages” of public investment or government attention. As apparent in the current Australian process, as in Rockefeller, there are pressures to divert attention from the issue of aggregate growth to more anodyne considerations such as population distribution and mobility, support for the ageing, claimed scarcities of skills in the labor force, and population shrinkage in some localities.

Another complicating factor for consistent policy in the U.S. and Australia is their federal form of government. Their states have both authority and interest in legislating for themselves about population. Federal systems heighten competition among their political subdivisions to attract population growth both as a marker of a “good business climate” attractive to investors and to enhance their political voice and justify larger shares of federally distributed revenues.

Buttressing the inclination to tread cautiously is the longstanding suspicion in both countries of “social engineering.” The spirit of *laissez faire* runs deep in U.S. and Australian political economy, both in the tradition of protecting private reproductive behavior from government interference, and in the faith that the “invisible hand” of market forces will avert overpopulation or over-immigration.

The emergence of the welfare state has brought its own special obstacles. In considering pronatalist family and child subsidies, such as children’s allowances and refundable family tax credits, the presumed benefits of social justice and economy-boosting Keynesian stimuli easily trump any demographic interests. Slow population growth also becomes a threat to educators and other career service providers.

Multiculturalism has become institutionalized in both Australia and the U.S., acquiring niches in the government bureaucracy and established public and

private funding sources. So empowered, ethnic blocs tends to see any measures to slow growth as aimed at “unwanted” populations.¹⁴ The ethnics have all become prime stakeholders in immigration policy, which becomes a form of patronage and a measure of their regard in U.S. society.

Long conditioned to associate population growth and immigration with economic dynamism, business and investor lobbies now brandish the argument that immigration will enliven and rejuvenate the presumably declining creativity and intellectual vigor of western industrial states. Immigrants and their drive and high fertility are the obvious and most cost-effective remedy. Ageing of the population, not its growth, is the real threat to prosperity.

Related to the longing for more economic vitality is the historic conviction that a nation’s standing, prestige and even security internationally are enhanced by population growth. This is probably more understandable in Australia’s case, a small country living in the same neighborhood with population giants China, India and Indonesia. But it is not absent in the U.S. among a host of conservative pronatalist intellectuals.

In both countries, many major environmental groups remain “no-shows” in the debate over population. McNicoll notes the caution among Australian environmental leaders about engaging in demographic issues, preferring to limit themselves to issues with a narrower constituency appeal. Other environmental organizations assert liberal credentials and seek to appeal to minorities by supporting policies that also accelerate population growth: the Green Party of Australia and the Australian Conservation Foundation supported their government’s review of population strategy, but they regularly appeal for a more generous immigration policy.

In the U.S., the Sierra Club and other major U.S. environmental and population groups – including the successor organization to Zero Population Growth – abandoned their advocacy of immigration limits after Rockefeller to build a following among ethnics and to retain their appeal among increasingly multiculturalist funders. Thus, sustainable populations in Australia and the U.S. are to be sought by addressing the “root causes” in rapid world population growth rather than in national policies.

CONCLUSION

Advocates of population policies of restraint in industrial democracies must accept that they are seeking the performance of a politically unnatural act – an act whose political risks far outweigh likely rewards. So the mere fact that Australia has an open, high-level examination of its population strategy, whatever its outcome, educates its citizens and reminds other nations that dialogue on such a volatile issue is still possible. The first lesson the U. S. should take from the Aussie experience is to emulate it:

1) To establish its own high-level commission to define its population goals and strategies, requiring

that commission to convene for reviews of conditions and policies at least every five years; and

2) To create permanent high-level bodies within the federal government's executive (White House and major cabinet-level agencies) and legislative branches to keep population trends and policy needs under continuous review based on accepted indicators of sustainability.

The American people, like their Australian counterparts, deserve the assurance that population issues, so vital to their futures and those of their progeny, are not being left to global demographic trends or expedient short-term responses to pressure groups.

NOTES



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8. Derek S/ Hoff, Kick that Population Commission in the Ass: The Nixon Administration, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, and the Defusing of the Population Bomb, Journal of Policy History, Vol 22, No. 1, 2010. Hoff notes that there was still a significant strain of Malthusianism among U.S corporate leaders in 1970, though it was increasingly challenged by conservative economists and politicians of the Chicago School and libertarians. Two corporate leaders sat on the Rockefeller Commission. Neither of them dissented from its final report. One major corporate leader, Robert O. Anderson, CEO of Atlantic-Richfield, a committed environmentalist and donor, strongly supported population stability in his testimony at the Commission's 1971 hearings in New York.
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