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The Australia Greens were once an environmental party with a clear vision of the role of population size and growth in increasing environmental stress in Australia. During the late 1990s they abandoned this vision for new goals centred on social justice and international human rights. This increased their vote among a narrow section of the electorate — educated urban elites. But it deprived Australian politics of a voice that speaks for the Australian environment.

The Australian Greens is a political party that prides itself on being, and is widely perceived as being, a party of principle. But they have been contradictory and convoluted in determining exactly what those principles are, particularly as they relate to population and immigration.

Originally promulgated in 1995, the party's population policy was revised in 1998 and again in 2002. With each revision the Greens altered their principles, lessened their commitment to limiting population growth, and increasingly emphasised technology and human ingenuity as the solution to the problem of ensuring ecological sustainability. They replaced concern about population and environmental degradation with a social justice, global human rights platform. Subsequently they increased their vote — but chiefly among a narrow, elite segment of the electorate: the most highly educated.

Three headings — *principles, goals* and *short term targets* — form the Greens' policy shell. In 1995, under the heading *principles*, the party outlined a domestic and global policy based on ecological sustainability, intergenerational equity, and social justice.[1] The declaration cited the need to apply the precautionary principle in evaluating the human impact on the environment and advocated that Australia contribute towards a globally sustainable population through:

a) Managing our own population growth in accordance with more equitable consumption patterns in relation to the international context; and
b) Redirecting the bulk of aid towards eradicating poverty and towards those programs which empower women.[2]

These motherhood statements remained unchanged in the 1998 and 2002 revisions. The 1995 policy had also advocated action towards achieving a 'sustainable population' through managing per capita consumption levels and the use of technology. It also claimed that developing countries had increasingly adopted the consumption patterns of industrialized countries, resulting in overgrazing and over cropping.[3] The 1998 and 2002 documents elaborated this argument and emphasised ecological responsibility to future generations and to non-human species.

There the consistency between the three documents ended. In 1995 the Greens proposed a policy that would 'stabilise [Australia's] population numbers at a level which is both precautionary and ecologically sustainable'.[4] Sustainability, it suggested, was determined by resource use and technology as well as by population size. The 1998 and 2002 revisions omitted all reference to the size of the population as a determinate of sustainability.

The 1998 document states:

Development of population policy should be based on research which includes modeling of consumption and impact in order to determine a sustainable population. The process of determining population policy should be open and consultative.[5]

After abandoning reference to population growth in 1998 the current policy (2002) goes further and explicitly repudiates the idea that population size and growth matter:

An Australian population policy should consider the distribution of human settlement rather than just concentrate upon population size at the national level. The continuing de-settlement of rural areas must be considered in the light of ecological sustainability and efforts must be set in place to reverse it in those areas where settlement is ecologically benign. The ecological and social viability of areas expected to experience great growth needs to be safeguarded, and appropriate planning processes set in place.[6]

The Greens' current policy thus focuses on population distribution rather than on an overall national population policy. Moreover, the 1998 and 2002 revisions discard 1995's first short-term target of 'a program to stabilize global population' and place the emphasis instead on increasing Australia's contribution to global aid, family planning, reproductive health, and to empowering women.

The 1998 and 2002 policies are more involved and explanatory than the 1995 policy. Growing complexity points to a progressive fudging of the issues and the increasing timidity with which the Greens tackled population as well as the fact that concepts such as sustainable development, the precautionary principle, intergenerational equity, and 'green' technologies have become more common and accepted in the wider society.

While the policy revisions refer to the Earth's carrying capacity they also claim that the relationship between people and the environment is complex. According to the Greens, carrying capacity is 'mediated' by economic, social, political, cultural, and technological considerations.[7] Also, government must develop population policy with wide input and which respects human rights. These revised principles increased the distance between population issues and conservation.

Other changes further qualify the party's concern about population. The policy headed 'immigration' in 1995 became 'immigration and refugees' in 2002. In the former document the Greens recognised the environmental implications arising from population increase through immigration. But the addition of refugees to the policy heading (and to its content) focused attention away from the environment to human rights.

Immigration, the Greens maintain, must be seen within a broader population policy, which is non-discriminatory, honours international obligations to accept refugees, and centres largely on humanitarian and family reunion criteria.[8] These principles have remained essentially the same, but related goals and short-term targets have been extended and altered. For example, before the policy launch for the 1998 federal election campaign the Greens, immigration policy proposed that 'Australia's voluntary immigration program be *reduced* as part of a strategy to achieve eventual stabilisation of the Australian population'.[9] Subsequent policies dropped this strategy entirely and made no recommendation to reduce immigration. In fact the targets now openly encourage immigration:

The Australian Greens will work for:

a) a policy of multiculturalism that celebrates our Indigenous and immigrant history and welcomes further immigration.[10]

Early policies expressed the belief that the presence in Australia of people from different cultural backgrounds enriched society. However, the most recent 'immigration and refugees' policy does not mention cultural enrichment. Instead, it claims that while immigration may contribute to the population pressure on the Australian environment, 'this concern is tempered by our humanitarian obligation to accept refugees and by the social and economic benefits that immigration programs can bring'.[11] The current policy reiterates the idea that the voluntary immigration program should be based predominantly on humanitarian and family-reunion categories but, in keeping with the new emphasis on economics, regards the skilled migration category as a legitimate component of immigration.

In their 2001 federal election campaign the Greens launched an immigration and refugee policy that rejected the idea of zero-net population growth. The focus, they said, should be on consumption, not numbers, and Australia must address immigration as a global citizen, not as a closed state.[12]

Indeed, globalisation has proved a particularly seductive idea for the Greens. By shifting the focus offshore the Greens convinced themselves there was no Australian population problem. But this is a form of denial. As Garret Hardin points out: 'Calling a ubiquitous problem a 'world problem' is useful *only if there is a plausible worldwide solution*'.[13]

The 2002 policy revision retained the focus on rights of asylum seekers, conditions and services for migrants, support for the preferential family-reunion category, and respect for special religious and cultural needs. However, the new policy also proposes that family reunion be extended to all interdependent relationships, including same sex and intersex relationships, and that funding for public and civil sector agencies providing services specific to migrants (including asylum seekers and refugees) be increased.[14]

The Greens began obscuring the connection between population and environmental deterioration during the renewed debate about immigration reform which followed the 1996 election of the Coalition government. Contradicting their existing population policy, they opposed every government measure designed to better target the selection of family, skilled, and humanitarian categories. They also resisted all measures to control the family migration category despite the fact that, in 1996 when the legislation was introduced and in 1997 when it was reintroduced, the Greens' immigration policy clearly stated that the voluntary immigration program should be reduced.[15] In 1997, when questioned by Senator Harradine, the Greens leader, Bob Brown said he supported current levels of immigration — again contradicting his party's policies.[16]

Brown also argued against a 1996 Federal government proposal to issue personal bonds of up to $30,000 to ensure that a special category of new migrants settle outside capital cities. Yet, in 1998, the Greens changed their population policy to encourage planning to help ease pressure on major cities: 'an Australian population policy should consider the distribution of human settlements . . . [the] ecological and social viability of areas expected to experience great growth needs to be safeguarded, and appropriate planning processes set in place'.[17]

The 1998 and 2002 policy revisions attempt to overcome these inconsistencies and contradictions. But they also represent a response to changing terms in the national political discourse. At least some Greens believed that the party's population message became untenable following the rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation in the mid-1990s and the later prominence of refugees as a political issue.

According to Christoff, Hanson's policies highlighted the tensions between the Greens' universalistic principles and internationalist policies and more localist views.[18] Political commentary on 'Hansonism' undermined Greens Party policy because it linked their ideas on immigration with those of One Nation. Although the Greens argued that immigration should be predominantly based on humanitarian and family reunion criteria their policy up until 1998 still called for a reduction in immigration 'as part of a strategy to achieve eventual stabilisation of the Australian population'. [19]

Some commentators viewed this as racist, a possibility that may have panicked representatives to the Greens National Conference held from July 31 to August 2, 1998. Delegates agreed to drop wording about cuts to voluntary immigration and restrictions on concessional entry under the family reunion category. Deb Foskey, who drafted the policy changes, claims that they were made in response to growing racist sentiment but also reflected a revaluation of population-environment connections. One observer commented: 'The Greens' members who argued for a need to stabilise Australia's population found themselves uncomfortably close to One Nation's support for zero-net migration policies'.[20]

Nevertheless, contradictions remain. On the one hand the Greens still recognise the existence of a population problem but on the other hand they consider manipulating immigration policy as too 'simplistic' a solution to that problem. Their population policy still calls for 'balance' although this 'balance' is qualified by reference to priorities described in the immigration policy. Meanwhile, their immigration policy has increasingly moved away from concern about the impact of increased numbers on the environment towards a policy of putting people first. Stabilist policies were abandoned because they attracted criticism as racist and were seen as inconsistent with humanitarian, human rights objectives ingrained in party ideology. As Parkin and Hardcastle note, 'scepticism about immigration does not fit easily into political alliances which otherwise emphasise the virtues of humanitarianism, multiculturalism and internationalism'.[21]

In globalising the population issue the Australian Green Party repositioned itself as a social justice party only fragmentally connected to the cause of conservation in Australia. Instead, the Greens promote an international approach to the environment through a global green network and accompanying global charter. Bob Brown boasts that the Greens are the only global party in Australia with objectives paralleling those of other global green parties, which are 'born out of a similar impulse to combine social justice and environment in a new way of looking at the future'.[22]

When, during the 2001 federal election campaign, the Greens' social justice priorities became pronounced in their opposition to the Howard Government's position on refugees the socialist left applauded: 'Unlike previous election campaigns that focused on environmental issues, the Greens moved firmly away from a single issue party image. Instead, they sought to articulate a political

outlook with humanitarian values and sympathy for the third world at its heart'.[23] But there is also another way of viewing this reorientation: in 2001 the Greens aligned themselves with internationalist perspectives rather than with the needs of conservation in Australia.

The new international alignment required new principles. Accordingly, the Greens abandoned their original intention to limit immigration into Australia and stabilise population. Without citing any evidence delinking population and environment the Greens nevertheless now argue that 'immigrant numbers should not be cut to better protect the environment'.[24] The Greens' internationalism drove them to revise their population policy and their new population policy in turn allowed them to embrace and advertise their internationalism. These changes, they believe, remove the perception that they are a 'single-issue' party.

A struggle between internationalism and conservation embroiled the Greens from the beginning of their formation. Internationalists felt that the party's emphasis on conservation hampered their prospects. As early as 1995, when then Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot charged the Greens with being a 'single-issue fundamentalist party', members reacted. Peter Singer, who stood as a Greens senate candidate for Victoria in the 1996 federal elections, commented that: 'Everyone in the Greens sees the saving of our wilderness and the problems of wood-chipping as fundamental issues. However, Bob [Brown] has been moving the Australian Greens towards the model of the German Greens. The main theme I will take into the next election will be social justice'.[25]

Logically, it is not possible to have two 'fundamental' principles. One principle must take precedence; one must be fundamental and the other secondary. At present, the Greens consider social justice their fundamental principle and, in their 2001 campaign, they 'focused more upon the moral indignation over the treatment "of boat people" and questioning defence links to the United States than on environmental issues'.[26]

Undoubtedly, the prominence the Greens gave to social justice and human rights attracted new voters. But the appeal is a narrow one. The recent increase in the Greens vote comes largely from a small segment of the electorate. Between the 1996 and 2001 federal elections the total vote for the Greens increased two and a half times, from two per cent to five per cent. At the same time, the proportion of voters with bachelor or higher degrees voting for the Greens increased four times, from just three per cent of the total of people with such qualifications in 1996 to 12 per cent in 2001. The Greens also tripled their vote among the overseas born, from two per cent of such voters in 1996 to six per cent in 2001.[27] But no voter profile, such as age-group, place of residence, or sex shows such a dramatic increase as among those with tertiary qualifications. Thus by far the greatest increase in the Greens vote came from the educated elite. The Greens deepened their vote at the expense of broadening it. There are obvious limits to this strategy.

The party's new principles are still ambiguous. But their focus on rights and justice nevertheless effectively eclipse those conservation fundamentals — nature has intrinsic worth, does not exist for human consumption, and cannot be compromised — that motivated the movement out of which the Greens originally formed. Their current social

justice stance thus heightens divisions between science-based conservationists who value biodiversity and wilderness and the educated urban environmentalists who value human amenity but are ill-informed about ecology.

Over the last ten years conservationists have highlighted the growing evidence of the human impact on nature in Australia: declining biodiversity; collapsing marine ecosystems; clearing of native vegetation cover; failing rivers; growing salinity and acidification; and the subversive spread of exotic species. During this same time — as conditions on the continent worsened and knowledge of human impacts increased — the Greens adopted a passive attitude towards the population-environment debate, increasingly championed human rights, and detached themselves from conservation. Their lack of principle on population size and growth makes them an obstacle to clear thinking about the state of the environment in Australia. It also impedes our capacity to act to ameliorate its condition.

Appendix

The Green Party's current (2002) population policy
11. Population
11.1 Principles
Neither the planet, nor any country, can sustain continued human population growth at the level of resource use of most Australians. Four Earths would be required for all human inhabitants to live at the level that most of us do in this country. However, the relationship between people and environments is a complex one, not reducible simply to carrying capacity, but mediated by economic, social, political, cultural and technological considerations. The Australian government should consult with the widest possible range of interest groups to arrive at a population policy which respects human rights.

The basis for Australia's population policy, both domestic and global, must be ecological sustainability, intergenerational equity and social justice. A precautionary approach is required in order to take into account the consequences of human impact on the environment.

In order to achieve a sustainable population, action must be taken on consumption levels and technology use as well as population size. We must generate less waste and implement technologies, such as those based on renewable energy, which are more environmentally benign.

The consumption patterns of many in our comparatively wealthy country are contributing to global as well as to local environmental problems and we have a responsibility to current and future generations to ensure that we do not knowingly degrade their world. As Australians we also have a responsibility towards non- human species, many of which have already become extinct or endangered since European settlement. Government policies and taxation systems are tools which can be used to change consumption patterns over the medium to long term, and to protect and manage ecosystems vulnerable to human activity.

Australia must contribute towards achieving a globally sustainable population. We should set an example by:

a. managing our own population growth in accordance with more equitable consumption patterns in relation to the international context; and

b. redirecting the bulk of aid towards eradicating poverty and towards those programmes which empower women.

In attaining a sustainable population Australia must shift its involvement in a competitive world economy to a more cooperative, regional, self-sufficient economy based on equality and human rights.

11.2 Goals

An Australian population policy should consider the distribution of human settlements rather than just concentrate upon population size at the national level. The continuing de-settlement of rural areas must be considered in the light of ecological and social sustainability and efforts must be set in place to reverse it in those areas where settlement is ecologically benign. The ecological and social viability of areas expected to experience great growth needs to be safeguarded, and appropriate planning processes set in place. Human settlements should be designed and built to minimise environmental and maximise social well-being. Investing in the social well-being of the entire population should be the main aim of governments, so that there are publicly provided services of the highest possible standard. These services should include education, infrastructure, health, employment and income support.

The Australian Greens will work towards:

a. implementing the Programme of Action agreed to by the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 by lifting the level of our contribution to programmes which empower women and increase their access to a wide range of safe family planning options in our overseas aid budget to 4 per cent of the total aid budget;

b. legislation to ensure that Australian aid reaches 0.7 per cent;

c. the direction of aid to those programmes which benefit the very poor and to those which increase women's control over their lives; and

d. ensuring that Australian family planning programmes, both domestically and overseas, deliver services in the context of reproductive health programmes which increase the power of girls and women to determine their own reproductive lives, and increase the understanding of men of their reproductive responsibilities.

11.3 Short Term Targets

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