

POPULATION GROWTH IN AUSTRALIA: HOW ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS ARE RESPONDING

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Projections in the Third Intergenerational Report, released in September 2009, indicate that Australia's population may grow to more than 35 million by 2049. This revelation has sparked a new population debate, a debate which has challenged three of the country's main environmental groups. This article describes how they have responded to the challenge and offers a way of explaining the different paths that they have taken.

INTRODUCTION

On 18 September 2009 Treasurer Wayne Swan detailed some of the projections made in the forthcoming third *Intergenerational Report (IGR 2010)* (released 1 February 2010). These include a 65 per cent increase in Australia's population to over 35 million by 2049.¹ This contrasts with the second *Intergenerational Report*, released in 2007, which anticipated a population of 28.5 million in 2047.²

On 22 October, in a speech on the forces affecting Australia's economy over the coming decades, Treasury Secretary Ken Henry contemplated the implications of this population increase for environmental sustainability:

[W]ith a population of 22 million people, we haven't managed to find accommodation with our environment. Our record has been poor and in my view we are not well placed to deal effectively with the environmental challenges posed by a population of 35 million.³

That evening, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd responded:

I actually believe in a big Australia. I make no apology for that. I actually think it's good news that our population is growing ... I think it's good for us, it's good for our national security long term, it's good in terms of what we can sustain as a nation ... Let's be optimistic about the fact that this country is growing.⁴
The following morning the then-

Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull offered his opinion: 'Australia is going to continue growing and I do welcome a larger population'.⁵ His successor, Tony Abbott, agrees: 'My instinct is to extend to as many people as possible the freedom and benefits of life in Australia. A larger population will bring that about provided that it's also a more productive one'.⁶

Since this time the issue of population growth in Australia has gained extensive and prolonged media attention.⁷ Meanwhile, several public figures, including former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, Federal Labor MP Kelvin Thomson, former Australian of the Year Professor Tim Flannery, and Businessman Dick Smith, have echoed Henry's concerns.⁸

With the issue of population growth in Australia being publicly cast in terms of environmental sustainability, and in the light of the scale of recent projections, the responses of Australia's environmental groups are significant for several reasons. Firstly, if an environmentally harmful policy receives bipartisan government support, then such organisations can raise awareness and, with their political and media know-how, help to articulate and lobby for a coherent alternative. Secondly, the responses of environmental groups affect the perceived legitimacy of population numbers as an environmental issue.

The input of these organisations therefore forms an important contribution to

public dialogue on how to achieve a more environmentally sustainable society. Despite this, many of Australia's environmental groups have made little effort to engage in this dialogue.⁹ This article will examine the perspectives of several prominent national environmental groups, including one political party, that have addressed population growth in Australia. These are the Australia Conservation Foundation (ACF), Friends of the Earth Australia (FoEA), and the Australian Greens.

POPULATION GROWTH IN AUSTRALIA

Changes to the population size of a country result from natural increase (births minus deaths) and net migration. In an industrialised nation the replacement level total fertility rate (TFR)—the average number of babies born to a woman throughout her reproductive life—is roughly 2.1. Australia has maintained below replacement total fertility rates since 1976. Due to the relatively young age structure of Australia's population, however, births continue to outnumber deaths, and so natural increase remains positive.¹⁰

Preliminary estimates for the year ended 30 June 2009 are of an increase of 443,100 persons (2.1 per cent) to Australia's population. Of this, 157,800 (35.6 per cent) is attributed to natural increase, while 285,300 (64.4 per cent) is attributed to net overseas migration.¹¹ The majority of Australia's population growth is, therefore, controlled directly by government through migration policy.¹² This control is evident in the wide fluctuations in net overseas migration from year to year.¹³

Immigration to Australia is comprised of several categories. Of these, the humanitarian program granted visas to 13,507 people in the 2008–2009 year, of which the refugee intake was 6,499.¹⁴

ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS RESPOND

Environmental groups that contribute to discussions on population numbers will, presumably, be familiar with the above figures. This section outlines the positions of the three groups under consideration.

The Australian Conservation Foundation

On 22 September 2009 the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) released an article warning that, due to current rates of population increase: 'Australia's population is on a collision course with our natural environment'. The group argues that: 'We need a long-term population policy aimed at stabilising our population and consumption at sustainable levels and helping other countries to do the same'. Accordingly, the ACF agrees with Federal Labor MP Kelvin Thomson that a 'reduction in migration to more sensible levels is needed'.¹⁵

Several days later, in an article for the *Canberra Times*, ACF President Ian Lowe wrote that: 'There is a clear link between population growth and environmental damage' and therefore: 'A responsible government would be acting now to curb the unsustainable growth, rather than celebrating the disastrous trend ... Our aim should be to stabilise our population. This means we must have a look at migration levels'.¹⁶ Lowe has since repeated this message:

We should be particularly concerned about the loss of natural areas, the continuing spread of housing onto good agricultural land and the improbability of meeting responsible targets to slow climate change if the population keeps growing rapidly ... A sustainable future has to be based on stabilisation of both population and consumption.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Charles Berger, ACF Director of Strategic Ideas, has critiqued both the *IGR 2010* and the government's response:

The Government's stance has vacillated between claiming that such rapid population growth is inevitable on the one hand, and assuring us that it is good for Australia on the other. The claim of inevitability is disingenuous and easily dismissed. While some degree of growth is inevitable over the next few decades, both the pace of growth and the ultimate trajectory are well within the government's power to influence. Migration is the largest determinant of long-term population growth for Australia, and different migration levels mean the difference between population stabilisation and ongoing rapid growth.¹⁸

ACF leadership have clearly made efforts to contribute to public debate on this issue, and have communicated a consistent stance: that Australia's population size should be stabilised in the interests of the environment, and that this requires a reduction in immigration. This reflects official ACF population policy, which holds that: 'Unsustainable consumption of resources by a large and growing human population is at the core of most environmental problems facing Australia and the world'. The ACF therefore supports 'stabilisation of the Australian population and resource use at levels that are precautionary and ecologically sustainable'.¹⁹

The Australian Greens

Australian Greens leader Bob Brown has responded negatively to the recent population projections and to Kevin Rudd's optimism. In a media release titled 'Mr Rudd—When do we Stop?' he stated that: 'This population boom is not economic wisdom, it is a recipe for planetary exhaustion and great human tragedy'.²⁰ Brown expressed this opinion again in March 2010, referring to Kevin Rudd's vision of a 'big Australia' as worrying and unsustainable.²¹

This represents a changed position both for Brown and the Greens—a Party that has not challenged population growth

since the mid-1990s. This new perspective has been confirmed with calls to reduce immigration to Australia. Brown asserts that: 'We're at record high immigration and it's got to be reviewed ... I think immigration levels should settle down much lower than they are at the moment'.²² In line with this viewpoint, on 13 May 2010 a motion will be moved in the Senate calling on the Prime Minister to establish an independent inquiry into Australia's population to 2050.²³

Despite this, the Greens do not explicitly oppose population growth in their policies. Since 1996, when the Party called for 'lowering of the population growth rate until it approaches zero growth', the Green's assessment has changed.²⁴ A gradual move away from identifying population numbers as an environmental issue culminated in the Party almost not having a population policy:

[In] the lead-up to the Party's policy review of 2006 ... those drafting the revised policies had decided unilaterally to drop the population policy by simply not presenting a revised policy because they saw it as too contentious. Fortunately, a strongly worded letter drafted by the South Australian Greens helped to see the policy retained.²⁵

In the new policy, however, population size was not included among the factors determining the ecological footprint of a group of people. Instead, the Party's population policy now calls for:

[a] reduction of Australia's use of natural resources to a level that is sustainable and socially just; recognition that use of resources in production for export is as damaging to the environment as production for domestic consumption; [and] human settlements which are: designed and built to minimise environmental harm and maximise social well-being; and, located in areas where their ecological impact is minimised.²⁶

Clearly, recent comments made by

Brown do not reflect this Party policy. Although it is as yet unclear what has inspired a change in his or the Greens' perspective, there are several possible reasons. Firstly, the sheer size of new population projections makes it difficult for a green party to remain silent or supportive and still be taken seriously. Secondly, because this rate of growth has received bipartisan government support, the Greens could provide an alternative voting option in this election year; Brown has observed that most Australians don't support the projected population increase, and acknowledges that calling for a reduction in growth will be popular.²⁷

Friends of the Earth

Friends of the Earth Australia (FoEA) have responded to the recent population projections, although they have maintained a different stance to that of the ACF and Bob Brown. This group have been critical of those attempting to address population numbers as an environmental issue. Damien Lawson, FoEA National Climate Justice Coordinator, signed an open letter declaring that: 'We are shocked and angered that the ACF has supported Labor MP Kelvin Thomson's calls to cut Australia's migration rates'. The letter concludes by calling on 'the ACF and Kelvin Thomson to withdraw their anti-migrant statements'.²⁸ The issue has since been addressed by the group's National Liaison Officer, Cam Walker:

[A]s always happens when population and the environment comes into the mainstream debate, it becomes a useful smoke screen for people and organisations with racist agendas who can then call for limitations on population growth, while purporting to be concerned about the environment.²⁹

FoEA have been consistent in their stance on population, having disapproved of those who oppose population growth: 'FoE is very cautious about these types of approaches'.³⁰ Interestingly, FoEA do

believe that population growth in Australia has a negative environmental impact. The group's 'Immigration, population and the environment' position paper states that: 'There is no doubt that there will be a limit to the number of people that the Australian continent can sustain into the indefinite future'.³¹ More recently, Cam Walker has confirmed that 'there can be no doubt that increasing Australia's population will increase our ecological impact'.³² This belief is further evident in a 2007 interview with Walker, in which he suggests that it is selfish for Australians to have large families because of the environmental impact of more children in a country with high rates of resource consumption.³³ Despite the belief that creating more Australians is to be avoided, FoEA nonetheless insists that 'there is an onus on Australia to increase its immigration levels'.³⁴

I will now attempt to account for the perspectives of these organisations. In the case of FoEA, this means explaining the view that population growth has a negative environmental impact and yet should not be addressed as an environmental issue. This is also true for the Green's official population policy.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT: A COMPLEX ANALYSIS

FoEA argue that: 'for a rational discussion on population levels to occur, population must be seen within a deeper context'.³⁵ As Walker points out, 'even Paul Erlich, the prominent population theorist, identified that environmental impact is a product of population multiplied by consumption, influenced by the type of technology used'.³⁶ Likewise, the Greens note that 'there are complex issues involved in population policy'.³⁷ In 2002 a letter written by Cam Walker on behalf of, amongst others, several Greens representatives, asserted that:

The debate we need to have as a nation on what may constitute a sustainable popula-

tion must start with a clear assessment of our current ecological footprint, an acknowledgement that we are over-consuming, and a serious plan for reduction in ecological impacts, irregardless of final population levels. Population growth, while a factor in environmental impact, should not be considered in isolation of these other issues.³⁸

These statements suggest that population numbers must be addressed as part of a comprehensive analysis of environmental impact. The ACF agrees, with the fundamental point of their policy being that 'a future sustainable society must have stabilised both its population and consumption per person'.³⁹ Berger has reiterated this point: 'Australia now needs to shift its focus to policies that seek to match human populations and consumption levels within nature's carrying capacity, while transforming our economic and social systems to function within the limits of ecological systems'.⁴⁰

In an interview Walker pondered the issue: '[population growth is] a vexed question for many in the environment movement. We're cautious about just raising the issue of population growth per se. We tend to focus on consumption issues'.⁴¹ Thus, FoEA 'concentrate on resource use, especially per capita resource consumption, as a key driver of ecological breakdown'.⁴² Similarly, when discussing factors in environmental impact in their population policy, the Greens identify types of technology, consumption patterns and levels, resource use and distribution, and industrial and agricultural practices, but not population numbers.⁴³

FoEA and official Green Party policy have not addressed population in a deeper context. They have instead addressed consumption and technology divorced from population numbers. Their reluctance to tackle this issue, regardless of environmental consequences, suggests that other

priorities are held. I will now examine two main themes to emerge: humanitarianism and anti-racism.

HUMANITARIANISM AND REDUCING GROWTH

All of the groups are forthright about their commitment to humanitarianism and social justice, although the implications of these commitments for their policies vary. FoEA have labelled themselves 'a social and environmental justice network with strong internationalist perspectives'.⁴⁴ The group has therefore developed a population and environment project which aims to tackle the issue of population from a human rights and internationalist perspective.⁴⁵ FoEA note that 'asylum seekers who are escaping repressive regimes or natural disasters' are not to blame for Australia's environmental problems, and argue that 'there is an imperative for Australia to accept more refugees and asylum seekers'.⁴⁶

Likewise, the Greens have announced that they will 'support, through extensive community consultation, a population policy directed towards ecological sustainability in the context of global social justice'.⁴⁷ In 2004 Brown posed the question:

Should we be keeping our population static ... by lowering immigration ... to match emigration? The answer is no ... [S]ome fellow environmentalists want zero population growth now. However, I am a big-G Green, for whom human welfare is an essential political consideration.⁴⁸

The primacy of this humanitarianism is perhaps most evident in Brown's declaration that he has 'committed even more of my work as a senator to them [refugees] than I have to keeping the chainsaws out of the forests'.⁴⁹ More recently, having settled on views she believes to be 'consistent with the Greens general principles and political perspective', Greens MP Lee Rhiannon has argued that setting a fixed number for

Australia's population and determining immigration accordingly is not an appropriate policy. Rhiannon reasons that 'we are obliged to do our fair share' to 'help fellow human beings'. She specifies the humanitarian portion of our migration program as a moral obligation 'we can never ignore'.⁵⁰

All of the arguments presented by FoE and the Greens rest on the suggestion that Australia's humanitarian responsibilities to accept asylum seekers and refugees are incompatible with reducing Australia's population growth. Charles Berger from the ACF presents details of Australia's migration program:

I feel deeply that one of the true measures of a society's ethics is how it treats refugees and others on the wrong end of the modern global economy. Many people may not realise that in recent years more than half of Australia's permanent migrants have been through the skilled migration stream, compared with only 7 per cent of the total being humanitarian migrants and 25 per cent family migrants. So having a sound population policy that brings migration back down to reasonable levels does not mean shutting the door on refugees.⁵¹

Hence, the ACF 'believes that a sustainable population is achievable while still discharging our ethical obligations to accept refugees and ensure the ability of families to reunite'.⁵² The group contends that, taking into account emigration figures (the number of Australians who leave the country permanently each year), 'Australia can meet and increase its humanitarian obligations and accommodate family reunions, while reducing overall migration to more sustainable levels'.⁵³

Each of these three groups share a commitment to humanitarianism and social justice, evident in the belief that Australia has a responsibility to take a 'fair share' of the world's desperate people; refugees and asylum seekers. FoEA and the Greens have

implied that this responsibility is jeopardised by a reduction in population growth, and conclude that humanitarianism must take priority over environmental health. The policies of the ACF, however, which draw on the figures of Australia's migration program, indicate that these aims are not incompatible. The Greens now seem to acknowledge this, with Brown arguing for cuts to the skilled migration program and increases to the much smaller humanitarian intake.⁵⁴

If, as these groups have suggested, population growth in Australia has a negative environmental impact, and if, as has been noted by the ACF and now the Greens, the bulk of Australia's migration program is not of a humanitarian nature, then humanitarian concerns do not appear to override environmental concerns as such. Rather, for some environmentalists, defending immigration appears to symbolise a commitment to humanitarianism and social justice.

POPULATION AND RACISM

Another theme to emerge is the idea that to support a reduction in population growth in Australia, and consequently to support a reduction in immigration, is to share a goal with racists, and that this is to be avoided at all costs.⁵⁵

In recent years FoEA has addressed the issue of racism the most extensively of these groups. FoEA concede that advocates of population stabilisation are not necessarily racist. For example, Walker acknowledges that 'the main organisation in Australia advocating for reduced population, Sustainable Population Australia is clearly not a racist group and also stresses the need to reduce our ecological footprint and maintain an asylum seeker program'.⁵⁶ Elsewhere the group states that: 'FoEA does not suggest that environmental groups advocating for population stabilisation are racist, and notes the progressive social policies of organisations like Sustainable Population Australia

on issues like overseas aid'.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Walker insists that: 'while we would not suggest that a call for reduced immigration is necessarily racist, we would argue that such a call is not acceptable'.⁵⁸

FoEA claim that it is dangerous to oppose immigration-fuelled population growth in order to reduce environmental impact because this argument can be 'adopted by those with racist agendas'.⁵⁹ This criticism has recently been directed at the ACF and Kelvin Thomson: 'These proposals pander to racism ... your call for migration cuts opens the door to "fortress Australia" racism ... [and] risks encouraging the kind of openly racist campaign waged by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in the 1990s'.⁶⁰ It is in this climate that Bob Brown has observed that there is 'a lot of ignorance which drives fear of discussing population because you'll be labelled "racist"'.⁶¹

Regardless of their stance on population growth and immigration, environmental groups will have some potentially unwelcome company. As Clive Hamilton remarks in response to FoEA's 'Immigration, population and the environment' position paper: 'you say that environmentalists should avoid arguments that might play into the hands of racists. Quite so, and we should also avoid arguments that play into the hands of the fossil fuel lobby. But in the end one cannot control what other people do with your arguments'.⁶²

The positions adopted by environmental groups reflect their priorities. By not challenging population growth, or, indeed, by being critical of those individuals and groups that do do so, FoEA are sharing a goal with a growth lobby of sectional business interests that is unsympathetic to the health of the Australian environment. Furthermore, if the argument presented by FoEA is correct, then by sharing a goal they are providing these individuals and groups with the opportunity for an environmentalist disguise.

Concerns about racism have had a considerable impact on how some environmental groups address the issue of population growth.⁶³ Some environmentalists prioritise maintaining distance from potential racists by not sharing any goals with such persons, regardless of the implications for Australia's environment.

CONCLUSION

Following the most recent projections for population increase in Australia, environmental groups have had the opportunity to engage in the accompanying public dialogue. Their contributions affect the likelihood of environmentally-conscious strategies being pursued. In this context this article has aimed to determine how Australian environmental groups are responding and to provide an explanation for this. The ACF contends that population numbers should be stabilised in the interests of the environment. FoEA, however, have been critical of opposition to population growth. Barring some recent statements that do not reflect Party policy, so have the Greens.

One theme to emerge was the significance placed on humanitarianism and social justice. But an examination of Australia's migration figures shows that humanitarian responsibilities, as defined by these groups, are not jeopardised by reducing population growth. Support for immigration, and therefore population growth, appears to have become symbolic of a commitment to social justice and humanitarianism in some environmental groups. A second theme to emerge, most profoundly in FoEA, is the significance of anti-racism. For some environmentalists, anti-racism, as symbolised by a commitment to a large and non-racially-discriminatory immigration program, takes precedence over environmental outcomes.

The goals of Australia's environmental organisations remain contested. Several of

these groups do appear to prioritise non-environmental concerns, largely of a symbolic nature. Consequently, the environmental movement does not convey a coherent and united message on population growth. Furthermore, while this article has examined three environmental groups that do communicate a stance on the issue of population, many others make no such effort. It may be inferred from the findings here that it is simply easier for a group to ignore this topic than to negotiate the complex issues

associated with it. These are unfortunate findings, particularly at a stage where the desirability of pursuing population growth has become such a prominent topic, and where the course taken will have substantial consequences for the future health of Australia's environment. Nonetheless, there are some promising signs, with the Australian Greens appearing to have changed their position and to have joined the ACF in actively addressing population growth.

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