

**BOB CARR LAUNCHES MARK O'CONNOR AND WILLIAM LINES'
OVERLOADING AUSTRALIA**

■ **Bob Carr**

Thank you ladies and gentlemen, a great pleasure to be with you.

In my book, *My Reading Life*, which I know you've all read, I talk about seeing Paul Ehrlich on Australian television in August 1971. He was on Monday Conference, and he was very, very strong. And for me, he was someone bringing together all the evidence emerging in the world around us, and relating it to one underlying factor. And that is the unsustainably high rate of growth in the world's population. And who can say Ehrlich was wrong? He was talking about this in 1970. And what has happened in the years since 1970, we've gone from having 3.5 to 6.6 billion people on this planet.

Who can say Ehrlich wasn't, as I describe him as in *My Reading Life*, the prophet. I said the prophet has spoken. And the linkage, I'm sure you understand, is this remorseless rate of population growth on this small planet, and a doubling of the human population in that fantastically short period, 1970 to 2008. It's been a shock; it's been a trauma to the planet, a doubling in the human numbers.

I was honoured to see Paul Ehrlich on that memorable day, in November last year, the day Barack Obama was elected. The only thing that could have persuaded me to have taken time away from TV was the honour of introducing Paul Ehrlich at Macquarie University where he spoke about his latest book.

What Mark does in this book is relate those broad population arguments, the fundamentalism of population growth, the fundamental importance of population growth to this planet to Australia.¹ And he disposes of this persistent myth in Australia-

lian history that we are an empty space just waiting to be filled up. The myth that we are comparable to the United States.

You've only got to go to the Rocky Mountains, that huge watershed, those snow-capped peaks in all directions as far as you can see, providing rivers cascading down on either side, to know that Australia is not like North America. Our topsoil blows away. In America, the topsoil runs very, very deep. Then there are the mighty river systems of North America—by comparison ours are grudging streams. I sometimes surprise audiences by saying you could take all of the Australian rivers and put them into the Mississippi, and America would not notice the difference, that's how grudging our streams are.

We nonetheless had this silly view, that only began to be challenged in the 1920s, that we could be filled up, that our history would echo that of North America. The funniest part of the book is where Mark describes the famous Australian entrepreneur, William Cole, the author of *Cole's Funny Picture Book*, who said roundabout the time of the First World War, that irrigation would turn our barren soils into rich soils, and rain always follows agriculture. Well these are two propositions that have now been tested, and they don't work.

Ian Armstrong, former leader of the National Party in New South Wales, told me recently that he was in an area where 20 or 30 years ago, you could look out to the horizon and there was no agricultural activity. And we laid out farms on that space. And we're now realising the cost of it. It's economically unsustainable, and it's environmentally atrocious.

There's a lot of discussion that I think is equally funny of the economist (so-called), Colin Clark. He took on Paul Ehrlich in that Monday Conference exchange in 1971. And he argued that the world didn't have a population limit—that we could all live in the densities that characterised Holland. And Ehrlich said, but where's the food going to come from? It was a devastating rejoinder.

Years ago, as premier, I went to the Ku-ring-gai, I was actually launching my own book in a little hall there. And some very nice demonstrators came along. They were a delight to deal with. They came with their placards, and they said: 'No high rise in Ku-ring-gai, Mr Carr'.²

I said to them let's sit down and have a talk about this when the speeches are over. And I sat down and I talked to them and I said, Sydney's got a population approaching 4-and-a-half million. The national government takes no account of the pressures on the states—this was a coalition government at the time—and ramps up immigration. Sydney attracts 40 per cent of the national immigration intake. I said we're a state government; we've got to see that people are housed. If we didn't take rezoning decisions to increase urban densities, the price of housing would rise and rise and rise. We can't rely on urban sprawl forever. Ku-ring-gai's got to do what Strathfield and Hurstville, and—where I live—Maroubra, has done.³ That is, along the major transport arteries, provide appropriately designed, well-planned, apartment-style living.

I said, there's no good objecting to me, your objections ought to go to Canberra. It's in Canberra that the decisions are made that ramp up immigration. When immigration is ramped up, the extra numbers arriving in Sydney can't be accommodated in underground cabins. The city either goes out or it goes up, or a combination of the two.

The fundamental starting point is population growth. It's deeply imbedded in the Australian psychology that we've got to go for a bigger and bigger population. But in

this world it's the smartness of the people and their economic competitiveness that determines living standards. The economic arguments beg to be looked at properly.

You don't make Australia richer simply by giving it a bigger population. We can do more for the world with a smaller, highly education population, managing competitive industries and, in an era of globalised trade, regarding the world and not our domestic population, as our market.

Isn't that the lesson of globalisation? The whole world is our market. Over the last 30 years, as smart people, we have given ourselves very competitive industries. They are there to sustain us by exporting to the world. The idea that we have to replicate the American experience of the late 19th century in ramping up our population for industrial expansion doesn't make economic sense. When you deal with what our author once described in an earlier book as this tired, brown land, it is also an environmental impossibility.

I won't attempt to summarise Mark's arguments, but you've only got to think about water. To the people who say we ought to have a population of 40 million, 50 million, 60 million, I say, where's the drinking water coming from? Look at the acute problem, even in Sydney. Sydney is the best accommodated of any of the capital cities in this respect. We've got the biggest water storage capacity, in proportion to our population; we've got the most generous storage capacity for water of any of the Australian cities.

Go to Melbourne and there's a raging political argument about the state government deciding, as a necessity, that it must suck in water from the country, and build one of the world's biggest de-sal plants.

Go to South Australia, where the Murray has ceased to flow, and where they've got to get through a baking, dry summer before they look at any relief in their water position. And consider as a fallback proposition, the delivery by truck, street by street, of the required potable water.

And Perth, twice in the last 15 or so years, the rainfall in Perth has dropped, and it's dropped again. They're draining their aquifer for drinking water and they'll soon to finish their second de-sal plant.

There was a water crisis building up in South East Queensland, where the population growth has been the highest of any part of Australia, and they got a break with the rain, but so serious was it that the community had to persist with this delusion that there's some way of pumping water from the tropical north into the Brisbane catchment. Where is the water coming from? That's the issue.

Every significant activity in Australia is subject to an Environment Impact Statement, under state and federal law, except one, the most fundamental of all, a decision to ramp up immigration. There is no environmental assessment, none, not required by law. And that determines the shape of our cities and the pressure on other species to which Australia is home. Population affects our decisions about water, it affects soil, it affects everything. That is the fundamental.

I return to the point that Paul Ehrlich made in 1971, about the situation facing the world, and the point Mark is making about Australia. Population is the fundamental determinant. Mark challenges the environmental movement to give proper consideration to what's happening to the environment. And he introduces readers to the concept of Australia having, and we appropriate Tim Flannery's words, a carrying capacity.

He concludes by saying, we must end the era when Australia had no population policy except more. That's where we've been—our population policy has been nothing more sophisticated than that. I'll speak to you tonight as an unabashed supporter of multiculturalism. I love the multicultural Australia we've got. I want to see Australia offer a generous haven to refugees.

I'm opposed to and repelled by how the Howard Government manipulated the

refugee issue to appeal to an Australian nativism. But I want to see population growth regarded as the most important of the determinants that shape our environment. And I want us, above all, to recast old images of this wonderful continent we call our home. It's not Australia unlimited, it's not a replica in the southern hemisphere of the riches and diversity and deep soils and fabulous river systems of North America. It's got its own beauty, but its beauty won't permit more of the despoliation that we seem embarked on.

Mark is inviting us to debate these things. And I think that's a huge contribution. That's why I'm honoured to declare his book, *Overloading Australia*, launched in Glebe tonight. Thank you.

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Questions from the audience

I'll take a few questions, not that I'm used to them.

Q *Look Mr Carr, it floored me. I wrote to the Prime Minister. I said to him how can you have an immigration policy without a population policy. I got a nonsense reply of course. What we need is people like you to talk to the decision makers. How will you get the message into them?*

BC Well the things I was saying had an effect when I was premier. When business groups went to Canberra to argue for a great ramping up of immigration policy, they came away and said, the people we talk to, they keep referring to things you've said, and they're not prepared to take it on. To some extent I lost the debate. I had a silly economist, Saul Eslake of ANZ bank, argue that because I was saying these things, migrants stopped coming to New South Wales and drove our economy into recession. As if in these countries, the source of our migrants, people looked at the

occasional intervention I was able to make on these immigration issues. I couldn't believe that anyone would publish anything as silly as Saul Es-lake's view.

So it is, that in the period I was Premier, our share of skilled migrants went up, so he was talking rubbish, by any test. I just think you've got to put your case. The facts have not been put. There's a consensus that our population's ageing. But the author proves that that's wrong, and that immigration won't alter it. Immigration doesn't alter it.

There were three studies; I've always quoted this when I've written on the subject. We've got three studies that show increased immigration does not alter those ageing trends, and they're manageable ageing trends for Australia. But we're told it represents a crisis for Australia, even though it doesn't. All you can do is put your case, and to keep putting it, to keep writing those letters, ringing up talkback radio, talking to journalists, quoting the wonderful things in this book, which is really a primer. This book is really a primer for people who want to engage in this argument.

Q *Peter Costello said one for the mother, one for the father, and one for the country. What are your views on baby bonuses, because that's the other side on population growth, and I'm a strong believer that families should limit their number of children to two.*

BC Well I believe in population stability. I think if there's one thing this world doesn't need, it's more humans. To add another two billion to the world population or four billion to the world population by the middle years of this century is going to be fatal. It's going to be fatal for all the other animal life that occupies this planet. The wonder-

ful diversity of natural systems that we were gifted with, that is our gift from providence.

It's going to be fatal for the quality of life in countries like Kenya. Mark quotes Kenya. Ehrlich quoted Kenya in 1970. He said the population of Kenya doubles every 35 years. Women are trapped in poverty and abuse and ill health, very largely as a result of that. The Philippines has a spectacular rate of population growth, and they can't—unlike other nations in South East Asia—manage their way out of poverty.

We need population stability. And so I'm not a supporter of baby bonuses. Australia's going to have an extra one million people very quickly as a result of a steep increase in the most ambitious immigration targets proportionately in our history.

Q *I'd like your comment on the influence of religious leaders on politicians and the fact that politicians are ignoring the whole problem of overpopulation. What role does religion play in this?*

BC Not much, I think it's mainly from the business community. The business community's saying, and they just repeat the conventional wisdom of their board members, that we've got to have a bigger and bigger population. It's the conventional wisdom out of the business community that represents a bigger pressure on politicians. I don't think religious leaders are being vocal on this, or influential.

Q *What about being averse to birth control though, if you're talking about stabilising population?*

BC Religious leaders don't have an impact on behaviour, except perhaps in the Philippines. Religious leaders, certainly in the Christian world, have not influenced what people actually do in real life. That's why Spain and

Italy, despite the teachings of the church, have had population stability, pro-abortion laws, and access to contraception. I don't think they're an influence, I think it's a distraction. I think you've got business drawn to the idea that the economic development strategy for Australia must involve a high rate of population increase.

Economists have difficulty grasping that some things are limited. Soils, water, there are limitations here. Supply doesn't increase when the price goes up. Economists have a great deal of difficulty in seeing things outside their philosophy.

Q *Why has federal Labor not embraced those arguments?*

BC Because I don't think there's a debate, I don't think people have stood up to the conventional wisdom. I think people in the Labor Party don't want to run the risk of being associated with Howard's crude anti-refugee line, or to be seen to be critics of multiculturalism. But in fact a lot of people with sensible views on these matters happen to be the sons and daughters of migrants themselves, who've looked at this continent, and can see that it's dried up, dried out, the soil's blowing in the air, the river's barely trickling all the way to Adelaide.

Q *When you were premier you said some things about population. Were you consciously careful not to push it too hard, because of the power of the pro-growth lobby?*

BC No, the restraint that I had was that if I spoke too often about it, I would have copped the criticism, well that's not your job, you're not a national leader, your job is to get the trains working, to fix up hospitals, to make school curriculums good, and all

the rest. That's the sort of criticism I would have attracted if I'd made it a missionary endeavour.

But my intervention was frequent enough to have a commentator like Mr Eslake say: 'Carr's comments on immigration actually dissuaded migrants from coming here. This is a simple untruth, to the point of being ludicrous'.

Q *It must be very difficult for a politician to take the lead in these issues, when they're up for election in three years, and growth is seen to be a good thing by most of the populace. So does it ultimately mean, if we don't get leadership, political leadership, ultimately do we need change?*

BC Well yes, you need that. But I never felt that I was out on a limb by making these statements, by saying that Sydney is being forced to grow too rapidly, and that reflects over ambitious targets agreed on in Canberra. I felt on that issue, as much as any issue, people were listening to what I said, they knew it wasn't racist, they knew it wasn't populist, they knew it was founded on a concern with the environment. I felt I was carrying people with me. I would have guessed there was majority support for the proposition, based on our knowledge of this land, and its restraints.

This is an edited transcript of the launch of Mark O'Connor and William Lines's book, by Bob Carr, in February 2009.

Editor's notes

¹ William Lines was not able to be present at the launch. Consequently Carr addresses his remarks only to Mark O'Connor.

² Ku-ring-gai is a local government area about 16 kilometres to the north of Sydney's central business district.

³ These are other local government areas or suburbs in Sydney.