

## A BIOLOGIST IN THE SENATE

**John Coulter**

*Why does Australia find it so difficult to develop a population policy? The history of the Australian Democrats' attempts to develop and implement their population policy may suggest some answers.*

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Few of the many hundreds of conservation bodies in Australia and none of the political parties with parliamentary representation have seriously addressed the question of a population policy for this country much less the environmental damage arising from population growth. The recently released State of the Environment Report does identify population growth as an important element in environmental degradation. But, when I asked Senator Hill, Minister for the Environment, at the launch of the Report, whether the Coalition Government would develop a population policy, he answered, 'No, the Government's approach is to manage the consequences of population growth as it occurs'.

It is axiomatic that, unless population growth leads to a decrease in per capita environmental impact which it manifestly does not then population growth is a multiplying factor in the impact which the Australian population is having on its environment. It is clear that the Australian environment is not being managed in a sustainable way and the course being pursued is away from, rather than toward, ecological sustainability. This means that the lack of interest in and concern about population growth shown by both the environmental movement and the political parties is worrying and alarming. I have spent 40 years in the environmental movement, 17 as a Councillor with the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), and 16 years in the Australian Democrats party, eight as a Senator. I have watched and actively participated in the population debate in many organisations. I formed ZPG in South Australia in 1972. I have been firmly committed to having Australia develop a stable and sustainable pattern of population and lifestyle for more than 25 years, not in isolation and with lack of concern for other people and other nations on the contrary. To work on identifying and charting the difficult path to sustainability in Australia helps other nations and people to find their paths to the same goal. With this in mind I published a full page advertisement in The Australian newspaper in 1971 signed by 730 scientists from all states including Sir Macfarlane Burnet and Sir Mark Oliphant. It called on 'Those who Shape Australia's Destiny' to devote urgent attention to the development of such a sustainable pattern.

While there has been much talk, little real movement toward sustainability has occurred. What have been and remain the impediments? The history of the development of the Democrat's population and immigration policy illustrates the impediments at work.

Two groups amalgamated under the leadership of Don Chipp to form the Democrats in 1977: small 'l' liberals from the Liberal Movement and the Australia Party. The Australian Democrats adopted national party-wide ballots as the instrument of determining policy and, at its foundation, the members voted for the principle of ecological sustainability. This policy had been inherited from the Australia party but it was clear to me, when I joined the Democrats in 1980, that few members understood what the policy meant. It was not seen as a general guiding principle that informs all other policy areas, it was seen as just another policy, no more or less important than all the others.

Throughout the 1980s this gradually changed. Numerous meetings, National and State Conferences, a growing awareness in the community, all gave some substance to this nice-sounding thing called ecological sustainability'. Many in the party could see that it differed from policies in such areas as taxation or industrial relations in that it did set a pervasive model into which other policies must be set. In 1990 the party adopted a population policy. This says that Australia should seek to stabilise the size of its population as quickly as possible. From this position of stability it should assess the long-term ecological sustainability of that number and, using this yardstick, adjust the number until it was sustainable. Although not stated, any logical analysis would show that such an adjustment would have to mean adjustment downwards.

From 1987, when I was elected, to 1990, Senator Janine Haines was leader and Senator Michael Macklin Deputy Leader. (Sid Spindler, who played a key role in blocking a Democrat population policy in the early 1990s, did not become a Senator until the 1990 election. He had been on Don Chipp's staff earlier and was on Janine Haines' up to the 1990 election.) Neither Michael Macklin nor Janine Haines would participate in any discussion of population or immigration policy in the party room. Both became agitated and angry and left the room slamming the door behind them when, on several occasions, I raised the matter with the view of pursuing it in the Senate. I never did discover their reasons but have very frequently observed that such behaviour disguises a lack of any sound argument for the position taken.

The policy on ecological sustainability provided clear guidance on immigration to anyone who cared to understand and apply a little knowledge of demography. For example, with no immigration whatsoever the Australian population will not stabilise until 2031 when most if not all of those who have been Democrat Senators will be dead. With any net migration the date of stability is postponed and, with net migration of over 50,000 per annum, it is postponed indefinitely. But because the ecological-sustainability policy contained no specific figures in relation to the immigration intake, it allowed those who favoured high intakes to do so while claiming that they also supported a sustainable population. I therefore pushed for a national ballot on population policy to make the links explicit and to fill this gap. The ballot was held in 1991 and the result was clear. Democrat members, just like other Australians, wanted a much reduced intake. However two clauses of the new policy were in conflict. These related to whether refugees should be regarded as migrants and had little to do with the broad consensus on the migrant intake. Nonetheless, the conflict between them was sufficient for those opposed to the new policy to successfully seek a completely fresh

ballot. The National Policy Coordinator, Rod Benison, was opposed to the population policy and took several years to organise the second ballot.

The new ballot was held in 1993 and produced the same result, with some 80 per cent of voting members wanting 30,000 immigrants per year or fewer. Although the rules covering ballots specify that objections to the conduct of a ballot must be made while the ballot is in progress and not once the result is known, Senator Spindler appealed this second ballot after the result was announced. He made the rather curious claim that, if those voting had known the outcome of the ballot, they would have voted differently. Nonetheless, a coterie of influential members in key positions ensured the matter was submitted to yet a third ballot, a process which entailed further delays. The result of this third ballot became known in February 1995. It produced the same result. This is the most balloted policy of the Australian Democrats!

The policy, which has now been adopted, says that immigration should equal emigration in the previous year, that there should be no discrimination on the grounds of sex, sexual preference, ethnicity, race or religion, and that preference should be given to refugees. It also says that the considerable amount of money saved through the smaller immigration intake should be redirected into foreign aid; this recognises that money spent in aid will achieve more human welfare than the same amount spent on bringing people to Australia. The policy is environmentally sound, humane and non-discriminatory.

Former Senator Spindler (his term expired in June 1996) has resisted the democratically determined policy with vigour. He asserts in defence of his position:

*If we are successful in getting Australians to live more frugally then we may be able to support a larger population.*

This may be true but I believe the argument is irrelevant when both the old political parties and the whole economic rationalist drive is causing ever greater personal consumption and environmental impact. Increasing the population under such conditions only compounds the damage.

*Population growth is a global problem and it has to be tackled on a global basis.*

Ultimately this may also be true but we are a far cry from world government. While we have national governments those governments are responsible for protecting the environment under their jurisdiction. Moreover, Senator Spindler roundly and justifiably criticised the Coalition Government when it argued this same point in relation to greenhouse gas emissions at the recent Geneva Conference.

*The Democrats' population policy is not a humane policy.*

This is an odd defence. As we are talking about spending a portion of the Australian budget on people who are not Australians should we not spend that money so as to achieve the greatest human benefit? On that basis foreign aid wins hands down over immigration. It

could be said that favouring the few over the many is far more inhumane.

The policy has now been officially adopted but it is not being promoted by the parliamentary Democrats with any great enthusiasm. Apart from Senator Spindler's active opposition, there are others in the party who continue to obstruct the promotion of this thrice endorsed party policy, a policy which is both environmentally and economically sound as well as being in line with overwhelming public opinion. For some of them there is still a pervasive fear of the charge of racism. Whether this is what inhibits the present leader, Cheryl Kernot, and the deputy leader, Meg Lees, who has responsibility for both environment and population is puzzling. Neither have been prepared to debate their personal position before the party.

Not far from Cheryl Kernot's home on the Gold Coast is an area I visited several weeks ago. As far as the eye can see it is house-to-house suburb, some of it medium density. Three years ago this was dense rain forest; now not a tree is left. Even the politically correct '7-30 Report' identified this change as being due to the pressure of population growth.

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