

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN POPULATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA: THE DEMOGRAPHIC SETTING

Katharine Betts

The major parties are moving away from an exclusive pre-occupation with immigration to a broader focus on population policy and the Minister for Immigration has expressed an implicit preference for a population of 23 million. The contributions in this section of People and Place document his concerns together with those of the shadow Minister. They also provide demographic analyses which show that the Minister's goal will be hard to achieve. This is largely because of the exceptionally high migration of the Hawke years.

GROWTH, POLICY GAPS AND PROJECTIONS

In comparison with most other developed countries, Australia still experiences a high rate of population growth: the annual average between 1991 and 1995 was 1.14 per cent.¹ There are two reasons for this. First, despite below replacement fertility, Australia's relatively youthful population structure continues to generate significant natural increase. Second, net migration adds substantial numbers. At present, net migration accounts directly for rather less than half of the annual growth but, if current trends continue, by 2051 it will account for all of it.

A number of prominent Australians now argue that our high growth rate provides a special circumstance which should exempt us from the targets to be set for green-house gas emissions at the global climate change convention in Kyoto in December.² For this and other reasons Australia's growth rate is not a trivial phenomenon. Despite this, it occurs in the absence of any overarching policy framework.

Commentators often assume that natural increase cannot be influenced by policy changes. While this assumption may be made too easily, it is clear that the immigration intake is very much the creation of national policy. Policy does affect population growth but it does so in an ad hoc manner without a clear sense of direction. The nation still does not have a population policy.

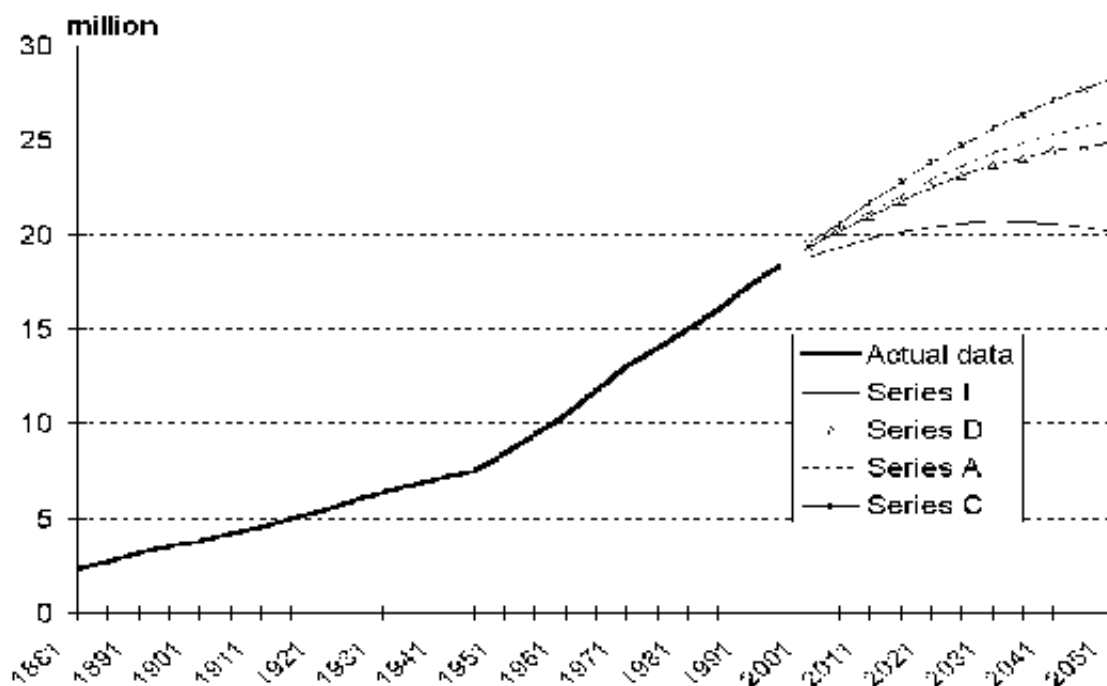
During the 1990s calls for a population policy grew. The Withers Report argued for one in 1991,³ as did the Australian Academy of Science in 1994,⁴ the Jones Report in 1994,⁵ Tim Flannery in 1994,⁶ and Doug Cocks in 1996.⁷ The minor political parties were quicker to heed this call than either the Coalition or the Australian Labor Party (ALP).⁸ But during 1997 the major political parties did begin to respond. Excerpts from recent major speeches by Philip Ruddock, Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, and Duncan Kerr, shadow Minister, are indicative of this growing interest. They are included in this section together

with an article by Christabel Young which provides a current review of the likely dimensions of Australia's population growth under different demographic assumptions together with an assessment of the nature and timing of our demographic problems.

The Minister says that his Government does not intend to develop a population policy but he does indicate an implicit preference for 23 million. His speech shows a wide understanding of many of the issues but, unfortunately, he assumes that this stable total of 23 million can be reached, and held, with a net migration intake of 50 000 per year. This would have been the case if such a policy had been instituted in 1986 but, as Young's article makes clear, the base population has grown to such an extent over the last decade that the Minister's figures are now obsolete. The shadow Minister's contribution is less specific about the numbers but it does suggest that the Australian Labor Party may indeed develop an explicit policy.

The exact levels of fertility, mortality and migration which would be needed for the population to stabilise at 23 million are not clear at the time of writing. But the four sets of projections recently published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) do include one series which assumes nil net migration. This is unlikely to be achieved in practice but it is useful for comparative purposes. Figure 1 illustrates the history of population growth in Australia from 1881 to 1996 as well as the four possible futures delineated by the ABS.

Figure 1: Population of Australia, 1881 to 2051, millions



Source: 1881 to 1995, *Australian Yearbook* (various years) and ABS, *Projections of the Populations of Australia, States and Territories: 1995-2051*, Catalogue No. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra, 1996

All of the projections in Figure 1 make the same assumptions about mortality: it will continue to fall and life expectancy at birth will improve, adding around five years to the average life span. Table 1 also shows that all of the projections, except series D, assume that

the total fertility rate⁹ will remain at around 1.865 per annum. Series D assumes that it will fall by 6.2 per cent to 1.75. The four series vary most in their assumptions about net annual migration. All of these variations matter. For example, if we compare series A and D, it is clear that the apparently minor difference in fertility generates a difference of 1.2 million in the two populations projected for 2051. But the different migration assumptions have a much greater effect.

Table 1: Assumptions used for the ABS projections

Series	Total fertility rate	Net annual migration	Population in 2051 (millions)
I	1.865	zero	20.1
D	1.750	70,000	24.9
A	1.865	70,000	26.1
C	1.865	100,000	28.3

Source: ABS, *Projections of the Populations of Australia, States and Territories: 1995-2051*, Catalogue no. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra, 1996

The population in 1995 was 18.1 million. If fertility is assumed to be constant at 1.865 and we just focus on series I, A and C, we can see that natural increase alone would add two million people while annual migration of net 70,000 would add an extra six million and net 100,000 would add an extra 8.2 million.

Table 2 shows that it was only during the brief years of the Whitlam Government that a figure comparable to the 50,000 widely used in the current debate was achieved. Under all other Governments since 1947 (when the post-war migration program was initiated) annual totals have been much larger.

Table 2: Average net total migration per year, 1947 to 1995 by Government

Government	Years	Average annual net total migration
Chifley (ALP)	1947-1950	71,900
Menzies (Coalition)	1950-1965	85,700
Holt, Gorton, McMahon (Coalition)	1966-1972	93,800

Whitlam (ALP)	1973-1975	39,800
Fraser (Coalition)	1976-1982	85,900
Hawke (ALP)	1983-1991	97,400
Keating (ALP)	1992-1995	72,300

Sources: ABS, *Australian Demographic Statistics (June Quarter) Catalogue No. 3101.0*, ABS, various years; *Demography Bulletin*, Bureau of Census and Statistics, various years

Notes: Table 2 allocates a year to a Government if the greater part of that year was spent under its jurisdiction. The relatively brief spans of the Holt, Gorton, and McMahon Governments have been combined. Chifley in fact formed his first Government in July 1945. Data have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

NET TOTAL MIGRATION, PERMANENT MIGRATION AND CATEGORY JUMPING

The last years of the Chifley Government are a period commonly thought of as one of very high immigration. It may come as a surprise to see from Table 2 that the average annual figures for this period were in fact similar to those of the Keating Government. (The Keating years included the recession of the early 1990s and are usually considered to be a period of low migration.) The answer to this apparent puzzle is to be found in the difference between data for gross migration and the data for net migration, that is, arrivals minus departures. Figure 2 shows net total migration from 1947 to 1995 and permanent (or gross) immigration from 1959 to 1995.¹⁰ Net total migration includes all permanent movement and all temporary movement (both long-term — trips of more than 12 months — and short-term — trips of less than 12 months). It is an inclusive measure recording all movement into the country minus all movement out and it does not in any way depend on travellers' statements about the duration of their visits.

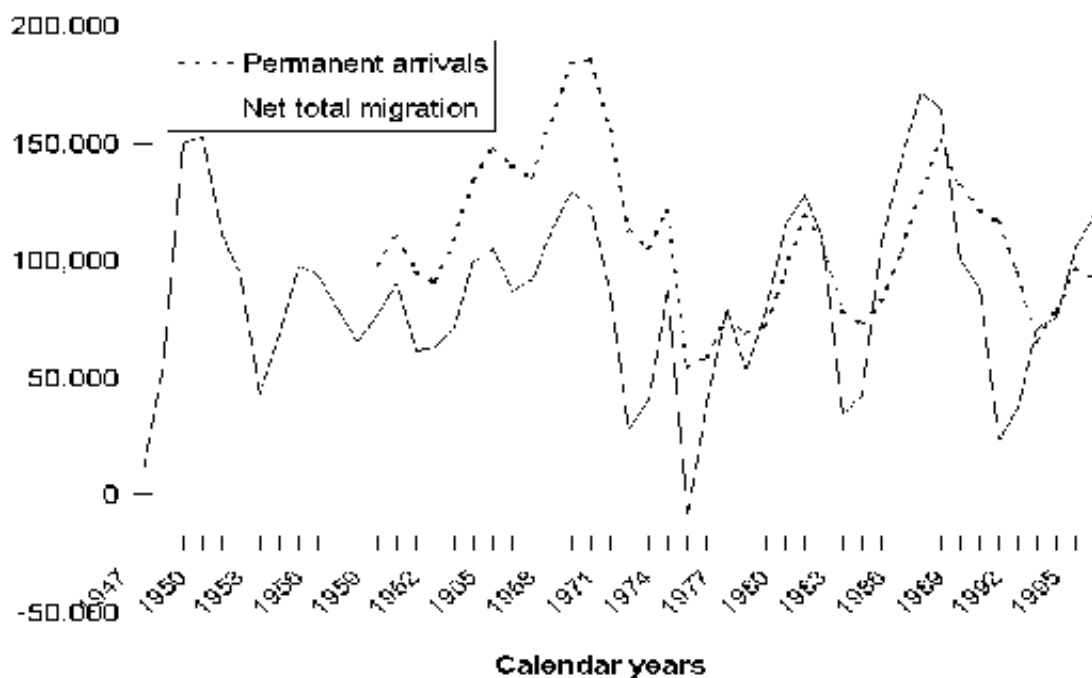
Measures which try to separate permanent movement from temporary movement depend on what travellers say about their intentions. But these intentions may change, or they may not be accurately reported. For example, some people may leave Australia and say that they plan to be away for six weeks. They will be classed as short-term temporary departures. But if they should find a job or a marriage partner overseas and never come back, their departures will in fact have been permanent. Such a person is said to have jumped categories. Conversely, travellers may arrive in Australia and say that they will be here for 18 months and thus be classed as temporary long-term arrivals, but some may change their status and remain permanently. If this happens they too will have jumped categories.

The ABS has a sophisticated process designed to estimate category jumping. Their figures

for 'Net Overseas Migration' are based on the net permanent and net long-term figures plus an adjustment for category jumping. From the point of view of working out what is happening in the current statistics for any one year this is a useful procedure, but the possibility for error is great and the data for this measure are frequently revised. Consequently the most valid procedure to follow when we are looking at a series of historical data is to use the net total figure.¹¹ Such a series does not have to be adjusted when estimates are revised because no estimates are involved.

Figure 2 allows us to compare the immigration of the 1960s with that of the last 20 years. It shows the annual fluctuations in gross and net migration and the changing differences between the two measures. Gross immigration was indeed high during the 1960s but net migration was, in relative terms, much lower. This is because, in that era, many 'permanent' immigrants in fact returned home. In recent years the two measures are much closer to each other.

Figure 2: Migration to Australia: 1947 to 1996



Source: ABS, *Australian Demographic Statistics* (June Quarter) Catalogue No. 3101.0; ABS, various years; *Demography Bulletin*, Bureau of Census and Statistics, various years

Indeed, in some periods, we have the apparently bizarre situation of the net figures exceeding the gross. This anomaly can be explained by category jumping. Since 1976 many people have arrived saying that their stay would be temporary but have in fact not the left the country.¹² This increase in category jumping explains why it is that the net total figures are on average higher in the last two decades than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Category jumping, plus a renewed enthusiasm for a high, formal immigration program, also explain why it is that the net intake of the Hawke years is higher than that of the Chifley era. Indeed

the average net annual intake during the period when Hawke was Prime Minister was higher than that of any other Governmental period since 1947.

PROSPECTS

The major parties are now starting to consider the idea of a population policy but they are having some difficulty in coming to terms with the demographic setting. While all of the relevant projections are not yet available, Young's work makes it clear that if fertility stays at around 1.865 and if mortality continues to improve as projected by the ABS, net migration will have to fall below 50,000 per annum for the population to eventually stabilise. If it is to stabilise at 23 million, the annual net figures will have to fall well below 50,000.

The Minister's speech outlines some of the obstacles which he sees as preventing the Government from reducing the intake very much below its current level. Indeed, given the pressures to maintain substantial immigration, low targets will be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, a clearer focus on population policy will help Governments of whatever party, to decide on the broad general dimensions of the population which the nation wishes to achieve during the next century and then to avoid policy mistakes which could inadvertently bring us to a very different future.

References

- 1 Derived from ABS, *Australian Demographic Statistics (September Quarter) Catalogue No. 3101.0*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Canberra, 1996, p. 7
- 2 See Australian industrialists referred to in R. Garran, 'PM woos Tokyo on emission targets', *The Australian*, 22 April 1997, p. 4, and the letter by J. Robertson, Executive Director, NSW Minerals Council, *The Australian*, 20 May 1997, p. 14; and P. Kelly, 'Greenhouse: why flat targets won't work', *The Australian*, 4 June 1997, p. 3
- 3 G. Withers, *Population Issues and Australia's Future: Environment, Economy and Society (National Population Council, Population Issues Committee — Chair Glen Withers)*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, pp. 121-123
- 4 *Population 2040: Australia's Choice*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1994, p. 136
- 5 B. Jones, *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': One Nation — Two Ecologies, Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, pp. 19-20
- 6 T. F. Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed, Sydney, 1994, p. 373
- 7 D. Cocks, *People Policy*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1996, p. 200 ff.
- 8 See Newman for a summary of the situation on the eve of the 1996 election: S. Newman, 'Population policy of Australian political parties — explicit and implicit', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1995, pp. 46-52.

9 The total fertility rate can be thought of as the number of children that a woman would have if she experienced childbearing throughout her fertile years at the same rate as women in different age-group categories in the year under observation.

10 Prior to 1959 temporary long-term arrivals, that is visitors for 12 months or more, were included in the 'permanent' figures, as were the arrivals of Australian residents who had been overseas for 12 months or more. This practice inflated the numbers of so-called permanent migrants . From 1959 long-term temporary movement was enumerated separately from permanent movement. See C. Price, *Immigration and Ethnicity: The Work of Charles Price*, Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Canberra, 1996, pp. 2-3.

11 See Price, 1996, op. cit., pp. 18-19; C. Price, 'Net immigration and population growth', *People and Place*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1993, pp. 32-35. It is true that the net total figures may vary dramatically in a single year because of fluctuations in short-term tourist movement but Price writes that this problem is minimised if a series is averaged over a number of years.

12 Most of this category jumping is legal. It either involves New Zealanders who do not need to obtain permanent visas and thus are perfectly free to change their minds about how long they will stay after they arrive, or other visitors who manage to arrange change-of-status from temporary to permanent, some on the basis of refugee claims but most on the grounds of either marriage or employment. The stock of illegal immigrants (mainly people who have overstayed their temporary visas and who have not regularised their status) appears not to have exceeded 90,000 since the late 1980s. See Joint Standing Committee on Migration Regulations, *Illegal Entrants in Australia – Balancing Control and Compassion*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1990, p. 14. There were 45,100 illegal overstayers in Australia as of June 1996: fact sheet from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, <http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/06UNLAW.htm>, accessed 26/5/97

Back to [Contents Vol. 5 No. 2](#)

Back to [People and Place Home Page](#)