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## AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION 'CARRYING CAPACITY'. ONE NATION - TWO ECOLOGIES. A REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

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Following an earlier analysis of the submissions to the inquiry (*People and Place*, vol. 2, no. 3), this article presents an overview and critical appraisal of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for the Long Term Strategies' report on Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity'. The constitution of the Committee, the inquiry process and the report production process are outlined, and the main findings and recommendations are evaluated critically. The report did not produce a conclusive recommendation on an 'ideal' population but did present a series of options for discussion.

Published in December, 1994, by the Australian Government Publishing Service, *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity' (APCC)* is the final report of the fifth and most recent inquiry conducted by the bipartisan House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies. Since its formation in 1990 this Committee (which is chaired by the Hon Barry Jones MP) has produced an average of one publication a year on issues of social and economic significance to Australia and potentially it plays

a useful role in terms of providing a public forum for the airing and dissemination of views on a wide range of national concerns.

As its name implies, an essential element of the Committee's charter is to encourage Australian governments to move away from their traditional, *ad hoc* decision-making procedures and adopt a longer-term, strategic approach to the setting of policy goals. Nowhere is this course more appropriate than in relation to current population and immigration policy.

However, whether the work of the Committee ever becomes translated into 'real' policy is another matter. For, as Slaughter has recently emphasised, '...future discounting is endemic in market-oriented societies, so any questions about future generations tend to be subject to unconscious filtering or dismissal by hard-pressed decision makers...'.<sup>1</sup>

Australia has a long and distinguished record in terms of conducting public inquiries and producing 'policy' and 'strategy' documents that promise much.<sup>2</sup> The recent national 'Aboriginal health', 'forest', 'tourism', 'conservation', 'regional development', 'urban' and 'coastal' strategies all come to mind. Unfortunately, though, because of a lack of political will, the subsequent *implementation* of these impressive policy documents almost always falls well short of the initial goals.<sup>3</sup> This point will be returned to later.

Invariably, the stamp of Barry Jones' humanist philosophy is clear in the Committee's reports. This has remained largely unchanged since his 1985 Commission For the Future paper on 'Australia as a Post-Industrial Society'.<sup>4</sup> In summary, Jones displays almost religious zeal in his belief in the power of technological innovation and institutional reform to 'fix' social and environmental problems and argues passionately for an Australia where raw materials and energy are replaced by brain power as the major economic determinant.

There is always a deep-seated conflict between individual and social goals present whenever population control is discussed. This means that the subject-matter of the recent APCC inquiry is by far the most emotionally and politically charged of the topics so far tackled by the Committee. Both before and after Federation the need for continued population growth in this 'empty' continent has acquired something of the status of a sacred cow in most government and business circles. Moreover, this entrenched position continues to be bolstered by strong support from such commentators as Julian Simon, P. P. McGuinness and Des Moore.<sup>5</sup> To challenge this view is often considered heretical.

#### THE COMMITTEE

The 12-person Committee that investigated the APCC reference included seven parlia-

mentarians from the Australian Labor Party (three from Victoria), four Liberal Party representatives and one National Party member. Queensland (ALP) and South Australia (LP) were allocated one each. Inevitably each individual approached the inquiry with their own prejudices and capacities to follow complex technical and ethical arguments. Given this ideological mix and the realities of politics in Australia, where population numbers at the State and regional level frequently dictate the allocation of financial resources from Canberra, one can imagine how difficult it must be for such a Committee to ever agree upon a truly *national* approach.

For instance, the data relating to regional population change and internal migration are well-publicised. Between 1987 and 1993 Victoria's population growth rate plummeted from 1.18 to 0.2 per cent. By 1993 – at 2.71 per cent – Queensland's growth rate was around three times the national average. The projections to 2041 have Queensland catching up to, and possibly exceeding, Victoria's population. These figures have major implications for political representation and resource-sharing right across the public sector. For example, following the next federal election, Victoria will have one less representative in the Lower House. Recently, too, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane – Mr. Jim Soorley – called upon Canberra to change its alleged bias against Queensland in granting federal aid immediately so that rapidly-growing Brisbane could be provided with adequate urban infrastructure to cope with an additional 137,000 residents by the year 2011.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE INQUIRY PROCESS

The process followed for each Standing Committee inquiry is a standard one and mirrors the consultative procedures adopted by the former Law Reform Commission in Victoria and by the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) process at the national level in 1991. Thus, following final agreement on the terms of reference, advertisements are placed in the major national newspapers inviting written submissions.

Upon receipt, these are then collated and reviewed by the Committee and the information supplemented by a limited number of public hearings in two or three major cities and the subsequent cross-examination of a small selection of witnesses. This body

of textual material is then analysed by a writer seconded for their expertise in the area. A draft report is subsequently produced for the Committee which edits the text prior to its final release. This editing process involves taking a stand in terms of 'balancing' the various arguments presented in the submissions, discounting some of the propositions put forward and presenting a set of concluding recommendations.

In the case of the population inquiry the bulk of the analysis and writing was done by Doug Cocks, a scientist from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) with long-standing expertise in agriculture and land degradation in rural Australia. It is hardly surprising then that much of the APCC report reads like an abridged version of Cocks' 1992 text, *Use With Care*<sup>7</sup> and that there is a strong emphasis on agricultural productivity rather than on the more intangible values associated with wilderness, scenic or cultural heritage and biodiversity preservation. One may also note in passing that rural depopulation in Australia is accelerating while the mega-metropolitan centres grow disproportionately, partly as a consequence of historically unsustainable farming practices. This trend has fuelled recent calls by the Business Council of Australia to reallocate much of the \$6 billion a year currently spent on roads away from the present emphasis on rural highways to their urban counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

Arguably, one of the greatest weaknesses of the APCC report is its unbalanced focus on the land and water problems of thinly-populated rural Australia by comparison with the country's rapidly expanding urban regions. It is in the latter that population growth is having its most direct and dramatic impact. For example, the recently-released *Cities for the 21st Century* predicts a population of 4.48 million for Sydney and the Central New South Wales Coast region by the year 2021. This is a smaller population than originally anticipated in the 1993 *Sydney Future* study, but will still require the construction of some 640,000 new dwellings in the Sydney region over the next twenty-five years.<sup>9</sup> For this writer, some of the most useful research currently being undertaken in Australia is seeking to operationalise the principles of ecologically sustainable development at the level of individual metropolitan regions.<sup>10</sup>

The process adopted for each inquiry has by no means been perfect. Less than twelve months are allocated to the entire exercise, including report publication; the response from key agencies or sectors is often very disappointing; and the public hearings have a limited geographical coverage. Perhaps more seriously, the bipartisan nature of the Committee inevitably means that what are seen by some as 'extreme' positions are often watered down to produce what in the end can become a bland, 'compromise' document. This is a common outcome in Australia. It characterised the National Conservation Strategy in the 1980s and all nine of the Ecologically Sustainable Development Working Group Reports published in 1991. The APCC document is disappointing in that it certainly had the potential to be bold and hard-hitting. Yet early on (on page 17), in a section mildly critical of the neo-Malthusian stance of Professor Jonathan Stone, readers are forewarned that they can expect no more than timid, politically moderated conclusions: '...the political process needs to be sensitive, openminded and flexible.' A cynic might well argue that this is 'double-speak' for business-as-usual, policy making 'on the run'!

#### THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference for the APCC inquiry were as follows:

- The population which can be supported in Australia within and then beyond the next fifty years, taking account of technology options, possible patterns of resource use and quality of life considerations.
- The range of community views on population size and its political, social, economic and environmental significance.
- The provision of a comprehensive information base on which future debates about population growth can be carried out without causing division in the Australian community, and including the provision of an accessible inventory of population research.
- Policy options in relation to population, including the need for national, regional and local perspectives.

What is of interest, of course, is that in its Terms of Reference the inquiry decided to focus on the relatively simple issue of population *numbers* rather than on the dynamics of a production system which is geared towards encouraging higher and higher levels of per capita consumption. Yet in the final

report there is often strong criticism of the many submissions that saw population growth *alone* as responsible for river and estuarine pollution, excessive waste, and the like. Echoing Borrie's conclusion from twenty years' earlier, and Caldwell's submission to the inquiry, the early message is clear and generally optimistic; with appropriate land management and related technological innovations, there appears to be no reason why Australia could not support 50 or 60 million people with ease. At the same time (on page 42) the report carries the strong implication that any talk of a *national* carrying capacity figure needs to be treated with caution and that the real focus of the debate should be on the sub-State, *regional* scale. This comes close to an admission that the broad charter of the inquiry was seriously flawed at the outset. At the very least, while recognising interconnections, the report maintains (p. 63) that 'arid', 'arable' and 'urban' Australia need to be discussed separately.

At this juncture I would merely add that around three million international tourists also make considerable demands on Australia's natural capital, as do numerous rural enterprises, increasingly foreign-owned and linked directly to overseas markets. In short, the *resident population* represents only part of the story in terms of environmental impacts.

#### CONTEXT AND FORMAT

The final report on the population 'carrying capacity' reference followed the acceptance and circulation of 261 written submissions received by the Committee between February and June, 1994, oral submissions from 23 expert witnesses and five public hearings held in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. Fewer than ten per cent of the submissions were in favour of continued population expansion. The publication also follows closely behind the (1992) Withers Report on *Population Issues and Australia's Future* and the *National Report on Population* prepared for the 1994 UN Conference in Cairo on Population and Development. Of contextual relevance, too, is the ESD exercise, mentioned above. The APCC report is slim, containing eight chapters in 150 pages. Each chapter has summary recommendations which are then repeated and assembled together in the final chapter. There are fifteen recommendations in total, though two of them (numbers two

and ten) are virtually identical in their wording.

The earlier reports and inquiries looking at the population question are discussed briefly in Chapter One where readers are reminded of the Government's rejection of the 1992 National Population Council recommendation that Australia should formally adopt a population policy. The APCC report expresses regret for this decision, argues the case for a population policy (as opposed to an immigration policy) and suggests – what is to this reviewer – the ineffectual option of the establishment of an advisory Cabinet Committee on Population. Ideally this would be chaired by the Prime Minister and would have representatives from six government departments. However, as we have witnessed so clearly in recent weeks with the woodchip debacle, the views of 'advisory' committees (in this case to the Minister for Resources) carry no force and are often ignored. The sensible suggestion of appointing a Minister for Population, together with a supporting Department, was not promoted strongly on the grounds that no government – present or future – would be likely to find the idea appealing! Whether appealing or not, such an initiative would go a long way towards rectifying the present, unacceptable situation in which the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs effectively seeks to silence any voices in the population debate unless they legitimate the current government's 'free trade' and 'internationalisation' agenda.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter Two reminds the reader of the key biophysical limits operating in Australia, albeit briefly, and includes a discussion of the state of Australia's rivers, groundwater and soils. Too little attention is accorded to Flannery's argument that we are fast running out of time in which we can continue to take risks and gamble with the rigid environmental limits that exist in this harsh land.<sup>12</sup>

Technological optimism abounds in this part of the report. Even though it was written at the time of one of the most protracted droughts of this century, the influence of environmental constraints is played down; the report argues that 'carrying capacity' is a function of choices, not environmental constraints' (p. 42). This is followed by a chapter which engages systematically with twelve popular 'myths' (for example, 'Australia has one of the world's most serious shortages of water'; and 'Quality of life for Australians,

especially urban Australians, has deteriorated with population growth'). Chapter Six – 'What submissions say about population size' – logically should have been incorporated in Chapter Three or should have followed it directly.

Submissions positing a direct and simple relationship between population growth and environmental degradation are summarily criticised and much is made of the CSIRO's so-called PLOT formula in which environmental impact (I) is a function not only of population (P), but also of technologies (T), lifestyle (L), and – most importantly – social organisation (O). The Netherlands is held up as a shining example of a country that has a 'superior social organisation' and high population densities and yet allegedly has 'minimised' environmental impacts (p. 67). This latter proposition is highly questionable for it would be difficult to find a comparable country where engineering works have so radically changed the original environment. Also, the worst floods this century have, at the time of writing, so far produced some 250,000 Dutch environmental refugees. So much for the Canute-like argument that superior social organisation can overcome biophysical limits! This aside, one can assume that good 'social organisation' implies a powerful role for the state ('political will'), strict planning laws and a high level of national consensus about what needs to be done. In no sense does deregulated Australia fit this model.

Chapter Four addresses the crucial role of *information* in the population debate and presents the argument that research in this area is poorly developed, badly co-ordinated and needs to be better funded. The following chapter analyses Australian population policy in the context of world population growth, concluding somewhat surprisingly (p. 88) that 'Australia should make its population decisions without reference to the world situation'. The final two chapters – one focusing on options and the other on recommendations – are the most important. The Committee is of the view that there has been an 'obsessive' focus on immigration policy to date and that this has effectively 'hobbled' strategic thinking about Australia's population future.

#### FOUR OPTIONS

The APCC report stops short of proposing what the future population of Australia should be, but does present four 'realistic options':

- (i) Relatively high population growth (ultimate population 30-50 million);
- (ii) Moderate population growth (20-30 million);
- (iii) Population stabilisation (17-23 million);
- (iv) Moderate to major population reduction (5-17 million).

These are merely presented as 'feasible' and 'politically acceptable' options to be debated by the community on an on-going basis. The Committee hopes for a better-informed debate in the future as more focused research is undertaken and more information comes to hand. Regular monitoring of population growth and its impacts is also suggested. It scarcely needs emphasising that there is an enormous population range represented by these four options and that, in this sense, the Committee has sent out some very mixed signals that do little to clarify the debate.

At certain points in the report one gets the clear impression that the Committee sees few problems with Australia opting for the first scenario. But this begs a number of questions. For example, new urban expansion would take place almost exclusively in the 10 per cent of the country that is in the high rainfall, agricultural zone. What does this mean for the future of agricultural production, increasingly geared towards export markets in Asia? Similarly, in rapidly-growing Cairns and Sydney we are already witnessing the demand for urban water-supply impacting negatively on scarce World Heritage and wilderness sites. Is this a sacrifice Australia is willing to make?

#### A FINAL COMMENT

According to the APCC report, the past and present 'villains' in the population debate are those who have either:

- (i) placed too much emphasis on the *immigration* question;
- (ii) argued for an ultimate population that is either too high (e.g. 60-100 million+) or too low (1-9 million);
- (iii) displayed too much scepticism about the potential power of technology and institutional innovation to fix such problems as soil and water degradation; and
- (iv) put forward arguments based upon assertion and prejudice rather than hard, factual evidence.

The first criticism is unreasonable for the simple reason that immigration from overseas

has been a major factor in population expansion in Melbourne, Perth and Sydney, in particular, in recent years. Between 1986 and 1991, for example, international migration added almost as many people (158,000) as natural increase to Sydney's population<sup>13</sup>, and we have already noted the most recent population projections for the Sydney region.

Earlier, I mentioned that fewer than ten per cent of the submissions to the inquiry favoured continued population growth. Yet, for the most part, this body of opinion was dismissed as being 'uninformed'. Such cavalier dismissal is of concern because in liberal democracies people constantly make decisions on the basis of their *perceptions*. As many politicians have learned to their cost, it can be unwise to ignore opinions based on people's lived-experience, in this case their experience of crowding, pollution or declining quality of life. The report makes much of the need for more research, better information and data, regular progress reports, and so on. In this context I would merely observe that it is not unknown for Australian governments to disband fact-gathering agencies or think-tanks if the information they are diligently collecting points in an 'unfavourable' policy direction. The fate of the Resource Assessment Commission is a perfect recent example.

Finally, any reader of the report cannot but fail to be struck by the enormous gulf between what is proposed in some of the recommendations and what is actually happening in Australia today. At a time when industry groups are mounting a concerted attack on the idea of an 'environment levy' (a term that has been introduced to replace the unacceptable 'carbon tax' idea) and the Victorian State government is giving every encouragement to a greatly expanded freeway programme, Recommendation Nine proposes that 'Australia must improve its efforts to reduce the impact of global pollution'. This is a noble sentiment indeed, but the reality is that coal-fired power stations continue to be constructed and the privatisation of energy utilities is proceeding apace in several States. Recently in New South Wales an appeal by Greenpeace against the construction of a new power station in the Hunter Valley was lost when the court ruled that there was insufficient evidence that the plant would exacerbate the greenhouse effect.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar fashion, Recommendation 11 states that 'Australia should adopt a consumption strategy...based on...lower levels of material throughput per unit of consumption'. Again, this is a worthy aim. But in a country where governments of all persuasions are active promoters of unfettered inbound tourism, where the well-intentioned Ecologically Sustainable Development process was effectively hobbled, and where the Commonwealth government is firmly committed both to free trade and competitive federalism, it is difficult to see this recommendation ever being taken seriously.

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