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AUSTRALIAN AMBITIONS: POPULATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Australian state politicians have been making strong, in principle, commitments to policies of environmental sustainability. At the same time, several have also put in place population policies which aim for high population growth, driven by overseas immigration. This article explores the extent to which any inconsistencies between these two positions are recognised and addressed. It focuses on the South Australian and Victorian experience.

Throughout the twentieth century Australia's leaders regularly promoted population increase. In the twenty first century, leaders, particularly state leaders, again champion population increase. This time around, however, politicians pursue high population targets while simultaneously endorsing environmental sustainability. Are the two compatible?

Unfortunately, politicians have not been forthcoming as to how they intend to match the two goals. While state population policies come with detailed prescriptions on how to increase population, sustainability policies lack all such detail. At best they imply that technology will secure sustainability but the ways and means of sustainability remain unspecified. South Australia, a desert state, already highly degraded, suffering from water shortages, and vulnerable to further decline offers an example of the inconsistency in the elaboration of population increase and environmental sustainability.

Shortly after assuming office in March 2002, Premier Mike Rann pressed the need for more people. He quickly found support for his population advocacy, amongst prominent South Australian businessmen. They included Robert Champion de Crespigny, (the appointed head of the state Economic Development Board [EDB] and a group of business leaders who put out a South Australia (SA)

Business Vision 2010. They, along with and participants in an Economic Growth Summit convened by EDB, all stressed that without population growth economic growth would falter. In November 2002 the state branch of the Australian Retailers Association joined the pro-population chorus and presented Rann with a report, *The Population Debate and the Economic Future of South Australia*, which warned that the state might not have a future beyond the next 100 years unless the population issue was addressed. It urged an immediate increase in state immigration to 20,000 a year rising to 50,000 a year after five years.¹

In November 2003, Rann told the National Population Summit that he supported a 'strategy of repopulation' and warned of an 'ageing population crisis'. 'South Australia's population', he said, 'is projected to age more quickly than Australia's, and experience the onset of population decline sooner'. He promised to respond with a detailed policy that would outline specific policies to stimulate population growth. In the meantime, he proposed that the national government favour skilled migrants who agreed to settle in SA.²

State Democrats Leader, Sandra Kanck attacked the rashness of the strategy, labelled increased migration a 'lowest common denominator approach', and argued: 'In a state as parched as

South Australia we simply don't have enough water to support a substantial migration program'. Sustainable Population Australia's (SPA) national president, Harry Cohen echoed Kanck's comments. He told the *Adelaide Advertiser* that, with increased population, 'Australians will be subject to more frequent water restrictions, even higher land and housing prices, congestion on the roads and more air pollution'.³

The issue of water shortage and quality had not entirely escaped Rann's notice. But he compartmentalised the matter and disconnected water problems from population and economic activity. In June 2002, concerned at the wastage of water from uncontrolled bores in Queensland, he called on Queensland Premier Peter Beattie to do more to secure the future of the Great Artesian Basin. Some months later he pleaded for more water in the Murray River to save it from dying. He said the river's condition represented a 'national crisis' and that saving the waterway should be treated with the same degree of urgency as the Bali bombings. The 'threat is not a future possibility, but a present reality'. Low water levels and high salinity offered a 'terrifying glimpse of the future'.⁴

But the prospect of that 'terrifying' future did not sway Rann from his population commitment. No matter how unpleasant South Australia's water future might become, the state still needed more people and more economic activity. Even as Rann recognised the dire condition of the Murray River his appointees to the South Australian Economic Development Board were holding round-table meetings on how to increase the state's population. Jenny Goldie of SPA was reported in the press as saying that the situation was absurd and that more people would put more pressure on precarious water

supplies.⁵

Consequences that critics viewed as obvious did not alter policies conceived out of an overriding allegiance to population growth. In March 2004, the overnment released its population policy, *Prosperity Through People: A Population Policy for South Australia*. The document emphasised what it viewed as an alarming picture of the state's demographic condition: lower than national average fertility; low share of national migrant intake; net outflow of people to interstate; a median age higher than the national median; and 14.7 per cent of the population aged 65 or over. Without action, warned Deputy Premier Kevin Foley, SA's population might peak at 1.6 million and go into decline within 25 years. In response, the Government aimed to double the state's population growth rate and, 'Achieve a population of 2 million people by 2050', from 1.533 million in 2004. 'Population growth', Rann proclaimed, 'holds the key to our state's future prosperity and sustainability'. This would largely be achieved through overseas immigration consisting of a doubling of the skilled intake, a five-fold increase or better in the business intake, and an increase of at least 10 per cent for the humanitarian intake. That was not the end of the vision. There were even more people to come. According to Foley, 'Research shows that a population of two million people in South Australia by 2050 will give a stable age structure that supports population growth and renewal rather than decline'.⁶

A few correspondents to the *Advertiser* criticised the policy. One declared that population increase and sustainability were 'mutually exclusive concepts' and asked what next? If South Australia doubled its population by 2050 would there then be calls for a further doubling and so on?

These were lonely voices. Mostly the media supported Rann. The *Advertiser*, for example, consistently reported favourably on Rann's population vision. Its reporters had baldly stated: 'There is little doubt that South Australia's population needs to grow'. The state's peak business lobby group, Business SA, agreed. It argued South Australia should increase its population to two million by 2013.⁷

Conservationists, formally committed to sustainability and the maintenance of the continent's variability and richness, left the government's policy of increase unquestioned. A week after the release of *Prosperity Through People*, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the Conservation Council of South Australia convened a two day Sustainability Conference in Adelaide. Rann opened the proceedings. Subsequently none of the speakers mentioned population. Like the Government itself, which quarantined discussion of environmental sustainability from population, the conservationists circumscribed their presentations and most speakers focused on narrow definitions of sustainability. Some said nothing much at all. Mike Krockenberger, ACF's Strategies Director claimed, 'Economic growth can both drive and hinder sustainability'.⁸

Next, Rann announced the appointment of a migration officer in Britain and other strategies to recruit migrants from the United Kingdom, South Africa, China, India, and New Zealand. The May 2004 state budget also contained \$250 million in extra spending for development projects aimed at creating new jobs and boosting population. In addition, the state budgeted another \$10 million for population programs. Treasurer Kevin Foley said, 'Population policy is paramount to our future — we're working very hard to deliver increased population'. Subse-

quently the state launched a two million dollar advertising campaign — Make the Move — in Melbourne, Sydney, and New Zealand to attract skilled migrants to South Australia. No equivalent, concrete, detailed policy appeared for sustainability.⁹

Alongside the visions of unlimited growth and half a million more South Australians there was a real, physical, organic world whose functioning and viability was already distorted by people and their activities. SA Museum director Tim Flannery grasped part of that reality when, in November 2004 (seven months after the launch of *Prosperity through People*), he released a report for the Premier's Round Table on Sustainability and warned of a climate change catastrophe and biodiversity collapse in South Australia within 50 years. By 2030, Adelaide's average daily temperature could rise by up to 1.4C while the number of days over 35C could more than double by 2070. Up to 50 per cent of the state's plants and animals faced extinction by 2050 — the same year that South Australia was supposed to reach two million people. By then reduced rainfall would put the state in severe water crisis. Another study predicted warming would wipe out South Australia's wine industry.¹⁰

Flannery was not alone in acknowledging the real world. Several reports released in the same year as *Prosperity Through People* discussed the accumulating evidence of the unsustainability of population and economic growth. In January 2004, Margot Wallstrom, European Commissioner for the Environment warned that human driven change — the result of increasing numbers and economic growth — was leading to rapid and irreversible environmental damage that would have severe

economic and social consequences. At the same time, scientists writing in the journal *Nature* predicted that even a mid-range global warming scenario would lead to the extinction of a quarter of the planet's species.¹¹

Population boosters, however, refused to relate the bad news to their ambitious population targets. In responding to Flannery's report, for example, the South Australian Government shifted the blame and changed the subject. Rann said it was a disgrace that the Federal Government had refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. South Australian Environment Minister John Hill was upbeat. He said the State Government's wind power and water conservation initiatives were providing leadership to address climate change. Least of all would the Government question its commitment to population increase; the subject remained taboo. Indeed, Hill thought the future was unlimited: 'One of the most exciting possibilities will be the use of hot rocks that could provide all of Australia's energy with virtually no emissions', he claimed.¹²

Politicians — even South Australian politicians — have not always been so oblique in their vision or obsessed by growth. In 1971, one of Hill's Labor predecessors, the then Minister for Environment, Glen Broomhill gave the opening address at an Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZASS) conference, Population — The Main Polluter. Economic growth, he said, 'has been one of the great unchallengeable assumptions in Australia's post-war story', along with slogans like 'Populate or Perish'. Both required questioning. There was 'a good case for slowing down migration' as well as limiting natural increase. More people meant more

contamination. There were limits to human activity and these applied in South Australia, Australia, and the world at large.¹³

Contemporaries exercise more influence than predecessors, however, even when the contemporaries are foolish and the predecessors wise. Rann's government was likely to be emboldened — and blinded — by Labor colleagues in other states also pursuing pro-growth policies, particularly across the border in Victoria. In December 2004, the government of Premier Steve Bracks released *Beyond Five Million: The Victorian Government's Population Policy*. In his foreword Bracks referred to projections that the state's population 'will grow by another 20 per cent, or one million people by 2025'. 'This growth is welcome', he wrote. Here, Bracks implied that the growth was inevitable. Elsewhere, however, the policy recognised that growth was not inevitable at all but must be encouraged by addressing the claimed 'low fertility rate' and by 'increasing immigration'. State action would be necessary. Indeed, increasing population was identified as an 'objective'.¹⁴

'Population growth is crucial to our economic future', Bracks claimed, 'because sustainable economic growth and sustainable population growth are inextricably linked'. There were challenges in accommodating another one million people but none were serious. For a start, 'A growing population is not incompatible with an environmentally sustainable future'. Some pages on, in the very short section headed 'Future Challenges: Sustainability and Liveability', the document repeats the assertion almost word for word: 'A growing population need not be incompatible with a sustainable future'. This repetitive use of a double negative — is not incompatible/need not be incom-

patible — signaled a reluctance to use plain, unambiguous language, such as: ‘A growing population is compatible with an environmentally sustainable future’. But perhaps this was too direct, too obviously bizarre, even for aggressive population boosters. They must qualify, mask, and obscure unrealistic claims.¹⁵

Unrealistic, because the task of accommodating one million more people rests on one vain hope: ‘Reducing our environmental impact per person is one part of ensuring we can continue to grow our population without placing undue stresses on the systems that sustain us’. Yet, Victorians, with a larger eco-footprint than people elsewhere in Australia, already have one of the biggest eco-footprints in the world. According to a Victorian Environment Protection Authority report released a few months after *Beyond Five Million*, only the United States, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates tax the planet more. The major contributor to the Victorian footprint is food, particularly red meat and dairy. Victorians also eat more seafood, drive further, and use more energy in their homes than other Australians. And the more they earn and the more numerous and wealthy they become the more they consume. In 2004 Victorians were using nature more rapidly than it could regenerate. They were depleting and running down the state.¹⁶

A concurrent analysis by the CSIRO on Victoria’s sustainability found that the state’s landscape were ‘probably the most stressed in the country’, a legacy of clearing 70 per cent of the state and intensive agriculture. Additionally, about 35 per cent of the state’s major rivers were in poor or very poor condition, and 44 per cent of native plants were thought to be extinct or threatened. Meanwhile, water use had spiralled: between 1984 and 1997,

the use of groundwater had increased by 202 per cent. Erosion, salinity, and acidity were reducing agricultural productivity across three million hectares of farming country. In the future, because of climate change, reforestation, and other factors, less water would flow into Victoria’s rivers and dams. The state was moving further and further from sustainability.¹⁷

Like their South Australian counterparts, Victoria’s Labor leaders felt they could ignore the evidence on declining sustainability and growing threats. It bore no relationship to, and would in no way alter, their pro-growth policies. They lived in an alternative world of unbounded confidence in a future with more people. In April 2005 Environment Minister John Thwaites was sure that a new authority, Sustainability Victoria, would be able to tackle all environmental woes and provide a framework that would underpin ‘everything we do as a state’. This response amounted to no more than a simple declaration of faith in the Government’s ability to overcome reality. This used to be called the conquest of nature. It is now called sustainability. Both are follies.¹⁸

Government failure to think, or rather, refusal to confront the evidence, receives sanction from purblind conservationists who concur in the belief that increasing population and maintaining environmental sustainability was not a problem. They trust that human ingenuity always equals the consequences of its actions. The key to sustainability and accommodating more people lies in applying cleverness and reducing consumption. In the featured article in *Habitat Australia*’s April 2005 edition, Strategies Director of the ACF, Krockenberger, contend that Australia has an ‘over-consumption and inefficient-production problem’ rather than an ‘over-population problem’. ‘Lifestyles’ and ‘affluence’ are more

significant than the numbers of people underlying and giving rise to the objectionable lifestyles and affluence. 'Population', he maintains, 'should not be removed from the context of consumption and production. It is a mistake to treat it in isolation'. But, by delinking numbers of people from 'lifestyle' and 'affluence' Krockenberger's argument commits the very error of omission he warns against. Moreover, his discussion takes no account of the 'rebound effect', whereby resource use increases as production efficiencies improve. Increasing the population multiplies the problem. But even without the rebound effect, increasing population still overwhelms savings in efficiency and reductions in per capita consumption. Total impacts increase even with falling per capita consumption. These outcomes escape the notice of those who exclude numbers from consideration. Krockenberger further dismisses the importance of numbers when he urges the country to continue to accept migrants, 'especially refugees' of whom 'Australia must take a fair share'. He did not quantify 'a fair share'.¹⁹

Krockenberger's views do not reflect official ACF policy. In fact, they contradict it. ACF has an unambiguous population policy, although it rarely advertises the fact. Its existence is not mentioned on the Foundation's home page. Similarly, the homepage omits any reference to sustainability. Yet, Policy Statement No. 51, issued 1 June 1993, recognises that 'human numbers are creating many direct and damaging impacts on the environment in both developing and developed countries'. It concludes that 'the global ecosystem can no longer withstand an increasing population, increasing resource use and increasing pollution rate all at the same time' and suggests Australia would be

better off with a 'stable population'. Accordingly, the ACF commits itself to supporting policies 'to progressively reduce immigration so that the annual target for permanent immigration will be equal to the permanent emigration of the previous year'.²⁰

The policy's existence, however, has made little difference to the way ACF staff articulate the Foundation's views on climate change, rivers and water, forests, land clearing, biodiversity, salinity, and other conservation matters. They consistently neglect to link any of these problems to population. Furthermore, they fail to demand that governments explain how they intend to square population increase with sustainability. This dereliction through silence and lack of critical review assists the sloppy thinking that sustains the inconsistencies between the pursuit of population growth and the pursuit of sustainability.

Perhaps under the presidency of Ian Lowe, and with a council newly committed to promoting the population policy, staff will become more engaged in population questions. Perhaps not. They have proved extraordinarily resistant to the subject in the past.

In the meantime, population boosters — unchallenged by the peak environmental groups — are consoled in their conceit that science, technology, and the market will trounce global warming, degradation, and over-consumption. This is despite the under-elaboration of sustainability policies, no actual progress towards sustainability anywhere in Australia, and increasing per capita consumption. They continue to agitate for more people, often in alarmist language. In December 2004, in a speech before the release of population recommendations from the Australian Population Institute, Peter Vaughan, chief executive of Business SA, said the state

needed a 'sense of urgency about the need to address population. There's a crisis coming within 30 years, and you can't fix it in the 29th year. Adelaide is a desert city that desperately needs more people'. A few months later, the Economic Development Board called for 'a major step-up in focus and effort' to increase the state's population. 'Bold strokes' were needed to help boost the flow of people to South Australia from interstate and overseas.²¹ Incapable of rejecting their pro-growth convictions and refusing to believe the awful possibility of their self-deception, leaders seek only to reinforce the version of events that suited them best. Alternative views, although they exist, remain unwelcome. Shortly after he became Premier, Rann established three advisory boards: economic development; social justice; and sustainable development. In April 2005 he appointed the heads of the first two boards, businessman de Crespigny and Catholic vicar-general David Cappo, to cabinet's executive committee. There was no representation for sustainable development.

As the Australian continent becomes increasingly stressed, population boosters think of sustainability only in terms of their own choosing: sustaining and increasing economic activity. Everything else is irrelevant. Applied to real, physical, ecological conditions, sustainability means nothing at all. As the editors of the CSIRO publication, *In Search of Sustainability*, comment, 'The word has become so extensively and rhetorically used through a decade of further decline in real sustainability, that it is in danger of becoming meaningless'.²²

Societies can and do survive a good deal of government folly. Of course there are always costs but, under favourable circumstances, when cushioned by large resources, human life, at least, goes on. But when the impotence of reason drives government and affects everything within reach — citizens, society, civilization, and nature itself — and there are no cushioning resources then folly becomes disastrous, and not just for humans. All life declines.

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