

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES' INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S CARRYING CAPACITY: A REVIEW OF SUBMISSIONS

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Australian governments have shown little concern with the future, so this inquiry stands out. But members of the public have taken more interest in the inquiry than government departments, unions, business groups, or the Australian Conservation Foundation. Most submissions argue for limiting growth: we need a national population policy integrated with policies for ecologically sustainable development.

As Richard Slaughter has demonstrated in his comprehensive paper on the chequered history of the Commission for the Future (CFF), placing 'the future' on the political agenda has never been an easy task in Australia.¹ Indeed, with the historical exception of major engineering projects like the Snowy Mountains Scheme or the recently released Great Barrier Reef 25-year strategy plan, influential forces on both sides of the political fence in this country remain opposed to any serious engagement with futures studies or concern with planning for the medium- to long-term future. In addition to substantial funding cuts to the CFF, recent evidence for this can be found in the effective 'burying' of the Ecologically Sustainable Development process and in the lack of commitment on the part of the Commonwealth and State governments to achieving even modest targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by the turn of the century. As we shall see, the marginalisation of population policy is another example.

One noteworthy — and welcome — exception to this opportunistic, 'business-as-usual' development path, and the mind-set that goes with it, is represented by the House of Representatives' Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies (SCFLTS). Chaired by the Hon. Barry Jones, this all-party committee was first established on 31

May, 1990. It consists of seven Australian Labor Party (ALP), four Liberal, and two National Party members and its expansive charter is to investigate 'matters, whether economic, social, cultural or structural, relating to the strength and well-being of Australia.' So far — clearly reflecting the Chair's central interests — the Committee has tabled four major reports in Parliament. The first two of these (in 1991) were on the topic *Australia as an Information Society*. The others (in 1992) related to *Expectations of Life and Patterns of Urban Settlement*. Current inquiries are investigating the *Workforce of the Future* and *Australia's Population Carrying Capacity*. The second of these is our main concern here. At the time of writing, an 'Issues Paper' on the topic is being written by an agricultural scientist seconded to the Committee from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and no final report has yet been produced. Accordingly, what is presented here is a necessarily introductory and selective overview of the various submissions that were received. First though, let us briefly look back and place this particular Inquiry in its historical context.

CONTEXT

On different occasions in the late nineteenth, and throughout the twentieth centuries, there have been heated public

disagreements about Australia's 'capacity' to support a given number of people. We can broadly recognise two recurring and polarised positions in these debates: what might be called the 'environmental realists' (or 'populationists');² and the 'technological optimists'. In general, representatives of the second of these two groups tend to argue that environmental problems have been greatly overstated and that the level and composition of immigration ultimately should be determined largely by *cultural* and *social* policies. An example here is Submission No. 21 by the Institute of Public Affairs, which was prepared by Des Moore.

The early geographer, Griffith Taylor, is one of the best-known of the first category. Battling courageously against the contemporary tide of opinion, Taylor continually highlighted the significant biophysical barriers to population expansion in Australia. In 1911 he anticipated a population of 19 million for Australia by the year 2000 and he also predicted *where* that population would be distributed. Some sixty years later, the 1975 Borrie Population Inquiry also came up with a figure not so very different from this early estimate (19.35 million by 2001), though the supplementary report, published three years later, suggested that '...a population of 50 to 60 million seems *feasible* and *manageable*' (emphasis added).³ At the time, Taylor's predictions were vilified as being needlessly pessimistic. Indeed they directly challenged the boosterism inherent in the 'Land-of-No-Limits' view that was also being vigorously promoted at this time. Twenty-three years earlier, in 1888, for example, an article had appeared in the *Spectator* magazine suggesting the 'reasonable probability that in 1888 Australia will be a Federal Republic, peopled by fifty millions...'⁴

As Powell has shown, other analysts, at different times, have produced predictions as wildly divergent as Belz's (1929) forecast that the population would be 12 million by 2000 and Penck's (1924) opinion that 480 million would eventually be attained.⁵ In more recent times, Paul Ehrlich has suggested that Australia is already overpopulated. In addition, much of the work of CSIRO scientists over the last twenty years has added weight to Taylor's warnings against overestimating the productive capacity of Australia's land, soil, forest and water resources.⁶ In April, 1994, for example, the Australian Academy of Science issued a statement urging that Australia should aim for an eventual population target stabilised at no more than 23 million. It considered that anything higher would exacerbate the already long list of serious ecological problems that Australia faces.⁷ These cautions have fallen on deaf ears in Canberra. The explicit policy agenda there is now for greatly increased exports of primary commodities — effectively, a policy of 'mining' our natural capital — and progressively higher numbers of overseas tourists.

In addition to the comprehensive Borrie overview, we have also had a number of other official inquiries. These have included: the (1977) Green Paper on *Immigration Policies and Australia's Population*; the (1988) FitzGerald Committee findings on immigration policies; the (1992) Withers report on *Population Issues and Australia's Future*; and the 1994 *National Report on Population* prepared for the meeting of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.⁸ As well, the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research has commissioned two major studies — one in 1990 and the other in 1992 — on the relationship

between population growth and environmental degradation.⁹ A reading of these reports, and their associated written submissions and recommendations, reveals a continuing tension between the 'populationist' and 'no limits' positions. It also shows how easily different conclusions can be derived from varying disciplinary perspectives and assumptions. In her overall assessment of some of these inquiries, Betts pays particular attention to the lobbying activities of various interest groups (ethnic, environmentalist and so on) whose lobbyists pushed for particular kinds of inquiries with different emphases at different times. For example, she reminds us that the FitzGerald inquiry was instigated largely by the ethnic lobby and that it '...dismissed the natural environment in a mere 205 words...'¹⁰

THE SCFLTS INQUIRY

The terms of reference of the 1994 SCFLTS Inquiry were extremely broad. They required the Committee to 'inquire into and report on:

1. 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;
2. The range of community views on population size and its political, social, economic and environmental significance;
3. 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;
4. Policy options in relation to population, including the need for national, regional and local perspectives.'

THE SUBMISSIONS

Following newspaper advertisements around the country in the major national dailies in early 1994, 261 written submissions were received by the Committee by the closing date of 27 June. One-day public hearings were also held in Canberra in May and June, in Melbourne in July, and in Sydney in August.

The response was disappointing, especially from women, who were responsible for only 45 submissions. There was no input forthcoming from peak local government, trade union or business organisations, and virtually no interest was displayed by a large number of State or Commonwealth government agencies such as the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the large water authorities. The majority of the submissions were brief, often handwritten, and from concerned private individuals, many of whom had an affiliation with voluntary local conservation or catchment management groups. There were surprisingly few written submissions from academic commentators. Only nine of the country's 36 universities and the CSIRO were represented in the 13 submissions received from academics. Most of these argued either for a stable or lower population.

Other notable 'gaps' related to Aboriginal organisations and individual local government areas suffering from the manifold problems associated with rapid population build-up. In particular, I have in mind here south-east Queensland (currently with net population growth of 1000 a week), the Cairns region and the outer edges of the major metropolitan areas. Most significantly, there was no submission from the central office of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), a clear

indication of the contentious nature of the population debate in recent years within that national organisation. The ACF's current population policy was formally approved in July 1993 but since then, for various reasons, the ruling Council has been reluctant to promote population issues.¹¹

Longer and more detailed submissions were received from representatives of such organisations as the Institute of Public Affairs, Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and the Bureau of Meteorology. For the most part these are thoughtfully presented but, in general, many of the submissions contain too much emotive assertion and too little dispassionate analysis. Moreover, few writers took the opportunity to discuss in any kind of detail the relevant *policy instruments* that are potentially available to the various levels of government. Also, of the five volumes of submissions that were received, the vast majority (208, or 80 per cent) argued — often passionately — in favour of *limiting* population growth by restricting immigration into the country that has by far the highest population growth rate of any affluent, industrialised country. Given the wording of the terms of reference, perhaps one would expect this. In addition, 13 per cent of the submissions (a total of 35) expressed a concern with the current situation but did not present any policy strategy, while only seven per cent (19 submissions) were in favour of continued population growth. In short, considerable attention was focused on the question of biophysical limits that had been ignored in the FitzGerald Inquiry.

The largest number of submissions (107) came from New South Wales. Forty-four originated in Victoria.

Around a quarter of all submissions were from Sydney residents, most of whom voiced dissatisfaction with social and environmental problems associated with rapid population growth. Melbourne residents, by contrast, appear less concerned.

CRITICISMS OF THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

While most of the submissions accepted the terms of reference, some of the more thoughtful responses were critical of them. For example, Betts and Birrell (in Submission No. 179) argued that any talk of 'carrying capacity' inevitably translates into policies with the 'physical goal of supporting the *maximum* number of people' (emphasis added).¹² This, they propose, is an undesirable objective on a range of social and ecological grounds. Population policy should, by contrast, be characterised by a precautionary approach.

In Submission No. 53, an economic historian from the Australian National University, Professor David Pope, followed the eminent Joan Robinson in describing an 'optimum population' as a 'will-o-the-wisp' concept. (This conclusion was echoed in the 1992 Withers report.) Pope also argued that defining '...carrying capacity makes, at best, limited sense as the numbers float with the assumptions made and these must change over time'. In a somewhat contradictory vein, he did, however, accept that the Commonwealth government always has to make concrete decisions relating to annual immigration intake figures but that 'carrying capacity figures...should not be pushed beyond, say, a decade ahead at a time'.¹³ Pope, in short, is arguing against the whole notion of long-term strategic policy formulation embodied in the charter of the LTS Committee.

In another submission (No. 136) Kesteven is even more critical of the notion of 'carrying capacity' when applied to humans, rather than simply to sheep or cattle. If we are dealing with humans there are, for example, obvious questions about 'what is to be carried'. Quality of life issues clearly invite questions about the provision of medical, educational and recreational services, in addition to simple measures of living space.

Other submissions, like that from the Uniting Church (Submission No. 137), also dismiss the central notions of carrying capacity and optimum population on both technological and moral grounds. Employing the same kinds of arguments as those used against Taylor in the 1920s, the Uniting Church queried the 'right of a small population to occupy the large area of Australia when other countries are becoming more and more crowded' and added '...Australians generally are used to an increase in population of between one and two per cent per annum'.¹⁴ But does 'large area' equate with 'liveable space' and does being 'used to' something in the past automatically translate into a valid policy direction for eternity?

Professor Walmsley and his colleague, Tony Sorenson, from the University of New England (Submission No. 66) present the further criticism that the question of absolute population *size* is much less important than questions relating to its *distribution*. They also argue that the Australian government does not have the policy tools to achieve set population targets. Their pragmatic proposal is to accept the *inevitability* of continued population growth in this country and to plan ahead for the infrastructure and other needs relating to given population thresholds in the future — 25 million, 30 million, and so on.

THE DIEA SUBMISSION

Though many Commonwealth government departments have an interest in, and influence upon, elements of population policy, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIEA) was one of only two Commonwealth agencies to make a submission. DIEA's was a lengthy document of some 50 pages, much of which consisted of statistical documentation of demographic trends. From a policy perspective, the document is extremely disappointing and displays a lack of commitment towards tackling some hard political questions. It speaks of the Commonwealth having 'some influence over population growth'¹⁵ but then slides away from facing up to a more proactive role by emphasising the significant role of State and local government and placing far too much faith in the now defunct, 'co-operative', Ecologically Sustainable Development process.

The submission is at pains to play down the link between population growth and environmental degradation. It reiterates the conclusion of the earlier Withers report that it was inadvisable to attempt to identify one single optimum population figure. It also highlights the government's rejection of that inquiry's call for a formal population policy.

THE MAJORITY VIEWPOINT

Over three-quarters of the submissions proposed more or less strict limits on the country's future population. They based this on the now familiar grounds that Australia is effectively a 'small' nation with poor soils, a hazard-prone climate, worsening water-supply problems in cities like Perth and Adelaide and already serious urban congestion and pollution in places like Sydney and Melbourne. In her submission on behalf of the NSW branch of Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population

(AESP), Helen Black highlights the problem that arises when 'populationists' (like members of AESP) shy away from identifying a more or less precise 'optimum population' figure. Effectively this leaves the way open for government agencies to declare 'that since no-one is sure of an optimum population size for this land the issue can be ignored and population increase and development should proceed unchecked'.¹⁶

Perhaps there is a lesson here for those who, like the present writer, believe that Australia has a moral responsibility to fulfil its international obligations under the terms of the recently signed Biodiversity and Climate Change Conventions that grew out of the 1992, Rio 'Earth Summit'. Population expansion impacts directly on the fulfilment of these obligations. It is time that we began setting realistic regional population targets based primarily around fundamental ecological parameters. And, as the Withers inquiry recommended, it is also time that the Commonwealth government started giving urgent attention to a comprehensive population policy for Australia. Politically, 'ecologically sustainable development' needs to be pulled back to centre stage and joined with the debate on population and resource use.¹⁷

It remains to be seen exactly what conclusions the Committee will draw out from the submissions received, but there is possibly a small hint of the Chairman's personal views in a statement he made in the course of questioning Dr Robert Birrell at a Committee hearing in Canberra on 28 June, 1994. Jones, who had recently returned from a fortnight in Turkey, observed:

The total area of Turkey is slightly less than New South Wales. It is, from my observation, a very inhospitable

environment, very high. A great bulk of the area cannot be cultivated. It has low rainfall, barren, rocky soil and all the rest of it. Yet there is a population of around 60 million. While it could still be thought of as a Third World country, it is not a Third World country in the sense that Bangladesh is or in the sense that the more desperately poverty-stricken countries of Africa are.¹⁸

In the meantime, the CSIRO Ecumene Project is already underway and is seeking more precise data on the kinds of issues raised by the SCFLTS Inquiry.¹⁹

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ETHNIC LEADERSHIP, ETHNO-NATIONALIST POLITICS AND THE MAKING OF MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

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The worldwide rise in ethno-nationalist tensions have echoed within ethnic communities in Australia. For a multicultural society, a recognition of this fact need not bring with it responses which intensify the dangers of conflict in Australia. Ethnic political leaders in Australia will learn to tread the fine line between legitimate participation in diasporic politics and domestic nation building.

During mid 1994 the television screens of Australia were loud with images of angry 'ethnic' crowds, marching in demonstrations, confronting federal ministers, being exhorted by state premiers, and joining political party branches in provincial working class cities. Out of the Balkans came a new sort of conflict. Domestic political alliances were mobilised both in relation to attempts by the fledgling Macedonian state to survive following the partition of Yugoslavia and to the perceptions of the Greek government and its Australian supporters that a Macedonian state meant a direct threat to northern Greece and Greek Macedonia. For a brief moment, unknown,

foreign-sounding and, for the mainstream media, unpronounceable names began to emerge into the public realm, names of people who were dubbed as 'leaders' in these many ethnic 'communities'. Such leaders were apparently able to mobilise significant number of their fellow ethnics, in some often mystical and un-nameable fashion, into practices which were seen as variously a 'threat to multiculturalism'; the 'dangerous but logical outcome of multiculturalism'; the 'importation of foreign conflicts'; a sign that the government 'did not understand its own policy of multiculturalism'; and so on in a rich soup of contradictory interpretations and analyses.