

**REVIEW OF DOUG COCKS'S BOOK, PEOPLE POLICY:
AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION CHOICES,**

University of NSW Press, 1996

Reviewed by the author

It is not often that an editor offers an author the chance to review his/her own new book. Furthermore, I suspect that the acceptance rate on such offers is low. While it is an opportunity to point out the book's strengths to potential readers, one is presumably also obliged to note the weaknesses, including those that might otherwise escape unnoticed. Nevertheless because writing one's own review is such an interesting challenge I have accepted the offer to review *People Policy* in as disinterested a manner as I can.

ORIGINS

Doug Cocks is a senior researcher in CSIRO's Division of Wildlife and Ecology in Canberra. Because he is an expert on the management of Australia's natural resources (his 1992 book *Use With Care* is a widely used tertiary text) he got the chance in 1994 to serve as consultant to the Jones inquiry the inquiry into Australia's population carrying capacity' by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies. The chair of that Committee was the Hon. Barry Jones, former Minister for Science. Cocks prepared a draft report for that Committee drawing heavily on 271 public submissions and on evidence tendered at several public hearings. A great majority of those submissions favoured stabilisation or reduction of Australia's population and, perhaps because it suits his argument, Cocks accepts that these views are representative of those held in the wider community.

At the March launches of *People Policy* in Canberra (by Ian Lowe) and Sydney (by Bob Carr) Cocks explained that his book had partly been a response to his disappointment that the Jones Inquiry did not make stronger recommendations than it did.

While the Committee said unequivocally enough that Australia needed a population policy (which is what a variety of commentators and inquiries have been saying for generations), it gave no guidance as to what it thought that policy should be or even what the attributes of a good policy might be. It called for the community to debate the pros and cons of having a small, medium or large population the very topic on which many people had hoped the Committee would give some guidance.

Frustration at the lack of community debate on population policy was another trigger to write this book. There just is no forum. The political process ignores population because, rightly or wrongly, it is seen as an issue on which parties can only lose more votes than they gain. At

the 1994 Cairo conference on population and development Australia told the world that it had no need of a population policy.¹ There is an occasional superficial TV program and an occasional article in the quality press, and that's it. People Policy is Cocks' contribution to getting this topic onto the policy agenda.

Population size is an important issue if only because so many people believe the consequences of getting it wrong could be quite unpleasant or that getting it right could be quite rewarding. Also, from a policy-feasibility perspective, Australia is in an extremely fortunate position. Our population, unlike many countries, is not yet out of control and, through migration controls, can still be managed. Apart from possibilities such as war, uncontrolled mass migration, disease and starvation, Australia has the political choice, through adjustments to its immigration program, to bequeath to the people of c2045 anything between a near-stable population some 15 per cent larger than at present and a rapidly growing population over twice the size of the present population.

AUSTRALIA'S IMPLICIT POPULATION POLICY

Cocks points out that, at least in a default sense, it is incorrect to say Australia has no population policy. His attempt to infer Australia's unstated population policy is as follows:

Australia is happy to accept whatever population eventuates by taking in up to 100,000 immigrants a year for the fore-seeable future, with the actual annual number depending on an intuitive political judgement in the range between:

- (a) a maximum number that anti-immigration and stablist groups will accept without protesting at a level that cannot be ignored in a democratic system;
- (b) a minimum number that pro-immigration and populationist groups will accept without threatening to withdraw electoral, financial or other support from the Government.

REVIEWING THE ARGUMENTS

A large part of People Policy is devoted to presenting arguments for and against a major population increase under the headings of economic arguments, resource availability arguments, environmental arguments, social arguments, international arguments and general or other' arguments.

Given that Cocks makes a reasonably good fist of collecting and summarising the plethora of arguments about population size under these headings, comprehensiveness has to be one of the strengths of People Policy, just as, obversely, a degree of superficiality has to be one of the book's weaknesses. His attempt to draw all the important arguments together in a 'weighing the evidence' chapter does not quite succeed although it sets the stage for a more successful effort at some later date.

So many debates about population lock onto one or two arguments; here we have them all from what he calls 'voodoo' (acausal) arguments (such as get population density right and

everything else follows) to an assertion of the centrality of the quality of urban life' argument. But how hard it is to argue that major population growth, a big cities phenomenon in Australia, stands to diminish the social and environmental quality of life (pollution, congestion, security, conviviality and so on) for most people when data on most aspects of quality of life are non-existent and when the effects of population growth are confounded with environmental management and urban planning effects.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Having concluded, inter alia, that the arguments for major population growth are weak and that those against it are moderately strong, Cocks goes on to argue for expeditious population stabilisation via immigration management. More precisely:

The most frustrating aspect of the population policy debate is that there is a middle road running through it that would be reasonably satisfactory to all the main players. But, like an electron that does not have quite enough energy to make a quantum jump into the next orbit, we seem destined to go round in circles carrying the present non-policy until some unpredictable trigger forces a change. This middle way, based on an explicit goal of eventual population stabilisation, is to set annual net migration (including refugees) permanently' somewhere below 50,000; then, depending on the figure chosen, population will plateau within a generation or so somewhere between 19 million and 23 million. Properly presented, with conviction and commitment, this policy would be generous enough to satisfy those supporting immigration for reasons unrelated to long-term population and restrained enough to satisfy most stablists'. It would remove the prevailing community uncertainty over this most fundamental of determinants of Australia's long-term future; and, at any time, in the light of new information and emerging events, we would still be free to reassess all options. (p. 313)

Formulating policy recommendations in this way is a significant contribution. By concentrating on the process of stabilisation rather than a numerical target, Cocks avoids tedious unwinnable debate about the right' population size. By seeking expeditious stabilisation, within a generation or so' (nothing too frightening there) we are beckoned towards the range of net migration figures which will achieve near stability' in that time frame. Finally we are led by the little finger to the range of near stable' populations implied by this range of net migration figures.

The heart of this book is undoubtedly the arguments for and against population growth and the argument for the core policy of population stabilisation within a generation or so. But it also has chapters on three important related topics: policies which strongly complement population policy in the search for quality of life; the non-immigration components of a comprehensive population policy and how to set up a society with the capacity to survive for a thousand years'.

Cocks really had no choice about including a chapter on complementary policies in fields such as ecologically sustainable development, settlement policy and regional planning,

education and social learning and technology search and assessment. Many people see the way to high quality of life as being via such policies without there being any need to pull the population lever as well. Others lock onto the population lever. But this is not an either/or choice and, like all problems, should be tackled by an appropriate mix of all available instruments. This chapter is Cocks' demonstration that he is not fixated on the population lever.

In a comprehensive population policy Cocks identifies the need to have a position on each of the sets of policy variables that could significantly affect the size, demographic composition and distribution of the population. Although identifying these has to be somewhat arbitrary, it is his conclusion that a comprehensive primary population policy should have six components or sub-policy areas as well as an immigration component. The suggested policy thrusts of these extra components are: eliminating unwanted' births; meeting Aboriginal aspirations; factoring tourist/visitor numbers into population policy; concentrating generous aid to the world's disadvantaged offshore'; upgrading local and regional population management policies; and educating the community in population matters.

The chapter on long term quality survival' explores interesting ideas from such diverse fields as social learning theory, complex systems theory, ecosystem dynamics and evolutionary ecology. All to no avail. The key to the door marked long term quality survival' remains locked.

[\[Table Insert - What the population debate is not about\]](#)

So, will this book make any difference? Will it hasten development in government thinking on population matters? Probably not. In several post-launch radio interviews with the author it was introduced as being controversial'; but it takes two to have an argument. The case for a much larger population in Australia has never been developed at any length. If People Policy were to elicit such an attempt, the stage would be set for a higher level of debate. Meanwhile, Cocks can claim to have laid another brick in the wall. Nothing more. Still, let's give the boy A for effort'.

Reference

1. National Committee, 1994, Australia: National report on population for the United Nations international conference on population and development, AGPS, Canberra.
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What the population debate is not about

1. The population debate is so easily and so frequently side-tracked that it is useful to collate a list of some common dead ends to be avoided.
2. The debate is not about whether we could cope with a much larger population but about deciding for ourselves whether life would be better or worse with a much larger population.
3. The debate is not about whether Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne are good cities to

live in but whether they will be better or worse cities to live in if they are allowed to grow.

4. The debate is not about past migration which has generally been judged a success.
5. The debate is not about individual migrants, each of whom is a person to be respected and valued for their contribution to Australian society.
6. The population debate is not about multiculturalism; the multiculturalism debate is about multiculturalism.
7. The debate is not about whether we should have a markedly smaller population than at present. The option of allowing the population to decline may be an issue in 20 years, but not now.
8. The debate is not about how many Australians could be fed with home-grown food, sometimes called the national carrying capacity. The answer here is 'a moveable feast' and gets bigger and bigger as you presume smaller and smaller calorific intakes.
9. The debate is not about whether environmental problems should be tackled by population management or by more direct means. This is not an either-or question and, like all problems, should be tackled by an appropriate mix of all available instruments.
10. The debate is not about identifying an 'optimum' population. No plausible, defensible method for doing this has been proposed or is foreseeable. Nevertheless, various population trajectories are available, and we must choose amongst these, either actively or by default. [[Back to text](#)]

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