

POPULATION POLITICS: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

An NPG Footnote by David Simcox

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Liberal-National coalition took power in Australia in September 2013, after winning a convincing election victory over the ruling Labor Party. Labor's acquiescence in the country's rapid population growth (which averaged 1.8 percent annually in the period from 2006 to 2011, peaking at 2.2 percent in 2008) is unlikely to change under the pro-business, pro-growth, center-right Liberals. Neither of the contending parties tried to make population growth an issue during the campaign, suggesting a continuing bipartisan understanding to take growth off the political table.¹

Chances are the new Liberal government will be even more responsive than were the Laborites to the demands for a "Big Australia." Business, investors, education, and the propertied classes are calling for more workers, home buyers and renters, students, consumers and clients. As Australia's foreign-born population rises, there will be more insistent demands from growing ethnic constituencies for additional humanitarian admissions and family reunification.

Australia has escaped the economic slowdown that has plagued the U.S. and much of the industrial world since 2007, thanks to strong world markets for its exports of energy, minerals, and food. Its current unemployment rate is an enviable 5.7 percent and its debt low by U.S. standards. Arguments for environmental sanity and population restraint have less resonance with the economy on a winning streak.

RESURGENCE OF POPULATION CONCERN: LABOR'S "STRATEGY"

Public angst over population growth peaked in 2009 following government release of projections showing Australia, now 23 million, would grow to over 36 million by 2050. Population growth averaged 1.5 percent yearly in the 2000s. Fertility of Australian women rose to nearly 2.0 during the same period. Other projections, such as those of the Academy of Science and Monash University, show population exceeding 40 million by mid-century. Sixty percent of the projected growth would come from net overseas migration, which has averaged 200,000 annually in recent years.

To American observers, this level of immigration might seem *de minimis*. But if scaled up to U.S. population size, it would be equivalent to 2.6 million immigrants arriving in America each year, compared to the 1.1 million settlers we now accept. Australia's foreign-born population is now 27 percent, which is twice that of the U.S. Our nation's population growth from immigrants, not counting their American-born children, is also smaller – about 45 to 50 percent – compared to 55 to 60 percent in Australia.

The outgoing Laborites repeatedly sent conflicting signals on population. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said early on that he was

for a "Big Australia," but later backed off the statement. Rudd's predecessor, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, pledged in 2010 that she "would not hurtle down the path toward a big Australia." Nonetheless, she gave assurances that her government would continue to run a "big immigration program." And it has done just that.

The Labor government also created a Ministry for Sustainable Population, and named a commission of academic, political, business, and environmental leaders to convene with the public and propose a sustainable population "policy" – later redefined by the government as a population "strategy."²

The population strategy Labor ultimately adopted in 2011 was a disappointment to the country's environmentalist and population "limitationists." It rejected any "arbitrary targets or ceilings" on overall population growth, accepting growth as an ingredient in the continuing economic expansion that promised increased community "livability" and prosperity for Australians.

The country's population issue – as this strategy chose to see it – is not its aggregate growth, but population "composition" (more diverse and rapidly aging) and population "distribution" (congestion in its mega-cities and coastal areas, contrasting with population stagnation and labor shortages in regional centers and rural areas).³ Sprawl, congestion, and environmental damage could be managed with proper planning and the well-targeted investment of resources.

In the present U.S. political climate and reigning growthist ideology, Americans can easily imagine a similarly constituted U.S. commission on population reaching similar conclusions: more economic and population growth, more planning, "targeted" public investment pork, and more technological fixes. Population "aging" would be a key justification for even higher immigration. Indeed, it has been in the rationale for a vast expansion of immigration as outlined in the U.S. Senate's 1200-page immigration reform proposals of 2013.⁴

OUTLOOK FOR POPULATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRUDENCE UNDER THE LIBERALS

The new center-right Liberal government is already showing itself to be less friendly than Labor to environmental protections, and similarly unconcerned about population growth. Abbott plans to end Labor-backed carbon and mining taxes, defund carbon control and green energy agencies, and promote now-slumping coal production and exports. On immigration, he says he intends to see that business gets the workers it needs.

But while friendly to immigration in general, Abbott's campaign scored well among Australians concerned about national sovereignty by pledging tough action against the frequent arrival of illegal smuggling boats containing asylum-seekers. (Under Labor, such arrivals have risen to nearly a thousand

a month.) Blasting Labor's incompetent responses, Abbott promised to cut the increase in refugee admissions proposed by Labor and ramp up a quasi-military "Operation Sovereign Borders," which would turn back migrant boats at sea before they could reach Australian territory.

ILLUSION OF BOUNDLESS RESOURCES MAKES AUSTRALIA A FAST-GROWING IMMIGRATION MAGNET

Australia's great size (nearly 3 million square miles) has nourished the fallacy among growthists that vast territory means vast carrying capacity. Australia's experience with population policy shows just how elastic the term "sustainable" has become in environmental discourse.

Australia is a severely water-deficient country, with an average annual rainfall of just nine inches – comparable to Arizona. Only six percent of the nation's nearly 3 million square miles is arable, and farms use 70 percent of available water. Farming, grazing, and non-native species have wreaked havoc on the nation's biodiversity. While this tragedy mirrors the experience of the settlement of North America, Australia's land lacks the same recuperative power.

Forests have shrunk by two-thirds since European settlement began and the country is heavily dependent on timber imports. The multi-year drought of the last decade devastated agricultural production and water reserves, while urban encroachment devours prize farmland near cities and California-style wildfires proliferate. Australia's oil production peaked in 2000 and it now relies on imports for half its needs.

Population expansionists on the 2011 Commission and elsewhere have familiar rebuttals to such concerns: the expected rising productivity and recycling of water; better agricultural technology to deal with drought, erosion and acidification; better land use planning; decentralization of urban populations; better planning and investment in general. The arguments are convincing

to the many who fail to see the harsh reality of limits, and to the politicians that represent them.

Indeed, unlike the U.S., Australia still has some leeway for modest population growth. Its per capita global footprint is among the world's highest at 7.8 global hectares (the world's average is 2.7). According to a New South Wales University study cited in *Bloomberg Business Week*⁵, Australians' per capita consumption of raw materials in 2008 (38 tons per person) was the world's highest – due in large part to its vast exports of minerals.⁶ But the nation's overall biological capacity is still a generous 15.4 global hectares per person, almost twice its current per capita consumption. Yet rapidly growing population, rising per capita consumption, and climate change could easily end this favorable surplus in two generations or less.

Australia, the "lucky country," is especially alluring to an overpopulated, underemployed world. The country's growth-minded elites appear to give little thought to the global appeal of their country and the awesome potential momentum of immigration. In 1850, the U.S. had the population of Australia today – 23 million. But with high fertility and open, subsidized immigration, our population leapt to 100 million in only 65 years.

Rather than negative population growth, a sensible population policy for Australia would be population avoidance: a slowing growth, leading to stability at 30 million or less by mid-century. Robyn Williams, a science journalist and Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, argues that by maintaining its present sub-replacement fertility and limiting net overseas migration to 100,000 a year (comparable to a generous 1.3 million in the U.S.), Australia could attain population stability at about 30 million near mid-century.

How big must "Big Australia" be? Its population strategy, by choice, leaves too much unanswered.



1. Geoffrey McNicoll, Institutional Impediments to Population Policy in Australia, *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, 12 (2), 1995 pp 97-112
2. David Simcox: Australia Considers a Population Policy: Any Lessons for a Drifting USA? *Negative Population Growth*, April, 2011)
3. Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Sustainable Australia – Sustainable Communities*, 2011
4. S. 744, Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013, 113th Congress, Washington, DC
5. *Bloomberg Business Week*, September 15, 2013

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