An Australian Population Policy

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Major Issues Summary

Australia finished World War II with seven and a half million people and the memory of near-invasion by Japanese forces. The 2 per cent population growth goal adopted then had widespread community support. Our population has now increased to 18 million, and consensus about appropriate size and growth rates has vanished. Views about optimum population size range from 5 million to 150 million.

In neighbouring countries, the fact that Australia's population is tiny in relation to our land area leads to widespread perceptions that it could be much larger. These perceptions will colour attitudes to Australia's capacity to accept refugees and regular international migrants. The extreme dryness of the Australian continent needs to be emphasised in our attempts to promote a more realistic perception among opinion leaders in these countries.

Most Western countries do not have an explicit population policy. Why should Australia be different? A key reason is that most Western countries do not have a substantial immigration program that is modifying their population in major ways.

The majority of Australians would appear to prefer a lower immigration intake than prevails at present. Thus our implicit population policy is incompatible with majority views, though probably not sufficiently so to lead to a major backlash.

Fertility has been below replacement levels for two decades, but age structure will ensure that at these fertility levels, natural increase will remain positive for another fifty years. A little-recognised possibility is that fertility could sink lower than its current levels, thus in time holding out attractions for pronatalist policies which stress that 'the best immigrant is an Australian baby'.

Seeking to respond appropriately to population trends is part of the mandate of all government agencies serving the population. The total efforts of the various government agencies probably deal reasonably well with adapting to population trends. But they certainly do not add up to an adequate coordinated effort to assess whether population trends are desirable and to seek to modify them if they are not. Policy that is only responsive to population trends rather than seeking to influence them does not deserve to be labelled population policy.
Successive independent population enquiries commissioned by government in Australia have all recommended the adoption of a population policy. So far, governments have always resisted these recommendations.

If Australia is to adopt a population policy, there are many issues which need to be resolved. Some of these are:

• Since current fertility rates are on target for eventual population decline, will Australia at some point need to work on modifying fertility? What changes in labour market and social welfare programs and tax regimes would be needed to prevent fertility from declining further below replacement level? How crucial is gender equity within the family?

• The need for better and more comprehensive population projections. More fertility scenarios are needed, as well as projections designed to permit the evaluation of the regional impact of demographic trends over a 10-year period.

• The resource needs and environmental impact of alternative future population trends need to be carefully studied. ‘Population growth is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for environmental degradation; it is, however, a strong predisposing factor’ (Cocks, 1996: 133)

• A number of issues relating to immigration need to be investigated, including the effect of immigrant settlement patterns on the internal migration of the local-born; the relative impact of immigration and of temporary international movements (tourism, students) on environmental sustainability; and the relationship between the scale and pattern of immigration and the formation of poverty groups.

• The effect of postwar immigration, and the likely impact of current immigration levels and composition on social cohesion, need to be carefully studied. Australia has the largest proportion of foreign born population (at 23 per cent) of any Western country except Israel. How tolerant are we of ethnic difference?

• The importance of the above question is that any foreseeable immigration program that selects migrants on the basis of criteria other than race will inevitably contain a substantial component (probably one-third to one-half) of migrants from Asian countries. Higher immigration levels will therefore mean more rapid modification of Australia’s ethnic mix.

What would a population policy actually entail? First, a sorting out of our medium-term goals for population size and growth. Second, decisions about whether we want to modify some of the distributional trends. Third, identification of possible levers by which population trends could be modified and the specific policy or programmatic changes that would be required to accomplish these changes.
Ideally, long-term goals for population size and growth need to be settled, but it is possible to conceive of interim goals that would leave long-run options open and therefore not require immediate consensus about these.

Adoption of a population policy would bring a greater degree of certainty to government planning and private enterprise decision making. At least some of the goals of government would be clearer, even if the government’s ability to attain those goals remained questionable.

In a number of recent discussions of population policy, the figure of 23 million has emerged as a ‘natural’ levelling off point for Australia’s population, given the projected slowing of natural increase and maintenance of a modest immigration program (net migration of 50 000 per year). More recent ABS projections suggest that 25 million is a more likely levelling off point, if fertility rates remain unchanged. Further discussion of the implications of such an ultimate population would be useful, provided it is recognised that no figure is sacrosanct.

Migration will remain a crucial element in Australian population policy. The policy must remain non-discriminatory on the basis of ethnic background, but as the volume of potential migrants will remain much larger than the number of available places, difficult decisions will remain with regard to balance between various categories of migrants.

With regard to distribution, a judgement is needed on whether current patterns of redistribution towards the north coast of NSW and Southeast Queensland, and the net loss through migration from South Australia and Tasmania are appropriate, and if not, what policies might be put in place to modify the trends. The same goes for internal redistribution within major cities.

Formulation and implementation of population policy would involve many different arms of government—those dealing with immigration, the family and social welfare, education, health, employment, regional development and urban planning, to name just some. Coordination between these bodies would be necessary in order to assess and anticipate population trends, develop policy on a consistent basis, and draw on effective community consultation and expert information in the process.

Whether or not government decides to formulate a comprehensive population policy, there is a strong case for an ongoing body with wide expert and community representation to advise government on population matters. Such bodies have been in place in the past, but in recent years government has lacked such advice.
Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of whether Australia should have a population policy and, if so, what the aims and components of such a policy should be, and how the policy would be formulated and administered. Some prior consideration is given to the definition of population policy, since this is very unclear to most people. Our 'population history' as well as the history of our attitudes to population matters are also examined, as they colour the way we view current issues.

Unanimity on population issues is clearly out of the question; on the size of the long-term sustainable population for Australia, for example, submissions to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies ranged between 5 million and 150 million. But in seeking the greatest possible degree of community support for population policy, a number of issues require research, discussion and clarification. These will be dealt with in the remainder of the paper, along with a discussion of what a national population policy would actually entail.

The International Context

Official population policies have been introduced in a substantial proportion of developing countries since the late 1960s. There was considerable international pressure for the adoption of such policies, in the context of the upsurge in population growth rates in the 1950s and 1960s caused by the rapid decline in Third World mortality rates without a corresponding decline in birth rates. The United Nations monitoring of population policies around the world found in 1991 that 69 developing countries (with approximately 85 per cent of the population of the less developed countries) viewed their population growth rates as too high, and 61 of these countries had interventions to lower their growth rates (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 1992, Chapter 3, pp. 38–39).

Though Western countries were at the forefront of pressures on developing countries to adopt population policies, there was—paradoxically—less pressure on Western countries themselves to adopt population policies, because their population growth rates were lower and their fertility seemingly under control (although planners in these countries were in fact taken by surprise by the substantial and protracted postwar baby boom). Thus in the United Nations inquiry, of 38 developed countries, the great majority considered their
rates of growth to be satisfactory. Only 16 mentioned any interventions: seven to raise them, nine to maintain them. The USA, for example, has never had a full-fledged population policy, although during the Nixon era the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, in its 1972 report, recommended that ‘...the nation welcome and plan for a stabilised population’. ¹ Some European countries (notably France) and a number of Eastern European countries have had pronatalist policies, but in most of Western and Southern Europe, governments have not formulated explicit population policies (McIntosh, 1986; Demeny, 1986), nor have they in ‘new world’ countries including Canada, New Zealand, Argentina and Australia.

The most dramatic measures—both of a positive and negative kind—aimed at reversing fertility decline were enacted in Eastern Europe during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Positive measures to raise the birth rate typically took the form of raising the economic incentives and lowering the costs of increased childbearing, along with the dissemination of propaganda aimed at encouraging the desired behaviour. Negative measures typically restricted access to fertility control methods (Teitelbaum and Winter, 1985: 115). In the West, ‘pronatalist measures have been slower to arise and more muted and subtle’ (ibid), no doubt partly because fertility declines lagged behind those of Eastern Europe. Western political traditions tended to limit state intervention in family matters, their more pluralistic political systems tended to constrain controversial actions by governmental elites, and their higher standards of living meant that economic incentives to childbearing proportionate to those taken in Eastern Europe would be far more costly. The more typical response in the West has been measures to adapt to low fertility.

As a ‘new world’ country, Australia is set apart from population policy developments in developing countries, even though some of these countries are its close neighbours. But the discussion of population policy in Australia has its own distinctive history, which sets it apart from that in other Western countries as well.

‘Population Attitudes’ in Australia

Settled just over 200 years ago as a British colony (later a series of British colonies), in the process displacing the long-standing Aboriginal population, the underlying aim of the different colonies’ policy, and later of Australian policy for at least the first six decades of the 20th Century, was to increase the British and British-descended population. This implied the marginalisation, and in some cases deliberate extermination, of the Aboriginal population (Reynolds, 1987). It was widely believed that the Aboriginal population would eventually disappear, though this was not usually stated in as many words. Convicts were the major element in population growth in the first 50 years in New South Wales and Tasmania (Borrie, 1994, Chapter 2). Symbolically, perhaps, this foreshadowed the attitudes of later years (indeed as recently as the 1950s and early 1960s) that European
Well before Federation in 1901, the various Australian colonies had imposed restrictions on non-European immigration, influenced by concern over the rapid expansion of the Chinese population in gold rush times in Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850s and in Queensland in the 1870s. Upon Federation in 1901, one of the first actions of the new Commonwealth Government was to pass the Immigration Restriction Act, and the White Australia Policy (the popular, no-nonsense term for a policy never officially known as such) remained in force for the first 70 years of this century. The population remained not only white, but also overwhelmingly of British-Irish extraction, until the eve of World War II.

World War II and the fright of a Japanese near-invasion coloured postwar attitudes. The population was less than seven and a half million at the end of World War II. Nobody doubted that it needed to be increased, and the aim of rapidly increasing the size of the population through a large-scale immigration program caught the public imagination. When not enough migrants were forthcoming from north-west Europe, the 'acceptable' source areas were progressively widened to eastern and southern Europe, and even to Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt, whose proximity to Europe apparently made them more acceptable than Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, India and the Philippines, which had many educated, English speaking, even Christian potential migrants. It was not until 1966 that the first substantial modifications were made to the White Australia Policy; the policy was subsequently dropped as part of the platform of both of the main political parties, and totally abandoned in 1972 by the newly elected Whitlam Labor Government.

Curiously enough, there was another contributing factor to rapid postwar population growth in Australia, and this was the postwar baby boom, but this never became a focus for policy debate. Immigration continued to hold centre stage in discussions about raising Australia’s population, even at a time when, in most years over the decade of the 1950s, well over half the annual increase of over 200,000 was contributed by a natural increase swollen by high birth rates (see Fig. 1). Pronatalism, of course, was associated in some people’s minds with the fascist policies of Nazi Germany and the Axis powers, and this made it hard to promote it as an instrument of population policy.
The population of Australia continues to be considered remarkably small by many people (including well educated people) in neighbouring Asian countries. It is, after all, less than one-tenth as large as that of Indonesia, which has only one quarter the land area of Australia, and about the same as that of Sri Lanka, which has the same land area as Tasmania. Typically, observers in these countries are unaware of the large proportion of Australia's land area that is desert or semi-desert, and increasing this awareness among opinion leaders in these countries should be a high priority of Australian diplomatic missions and Radio Australia.

In Australia, population attitudes have changed remarkably since the time of the postwar immigration drives. Australia's population has more than doubled since those drives began. But it has not reached the size probably considered desirable by most of those who thought about the issue in the late 1940s. What appears to have happened since then is that ideas about optimum population have diversified—from support for rapid population increase to a range of views, mostly favouring slackening growth.

Many observers still argue that a substantially larger population would benefit Australia economically; less frequently articulated, but probably still important, is the argument that a larger population would provide less attraction to 'envious eyes from the north'. And those who set great store by continuing diversification of the Australian population tend to
favour a continuing immigration policy to ensure a continuing ‘leavening’ of the population. However, the most pervasive change in attitudes in postwar Australia has probably been the increasing concern with environmental issues and the fragility of Australia’s ecosystem. This has led to an increased level of opposition to rates of immigration, compared to early postwar attitudes. The evidence from most but not all public opinion polls is that a slight majority of the adult Australian population thinks that the rate of immigration has been too high (Goot, 1991, Table 1). The level of opposition may have been increasing in recent times, but the evidence is not conclusive (Betts, 1996b). More will be said about these issues below, in discussing interest groups.

**Components of Increase of the Australian Population**

The Australian population is growing twice as fast as that of other Western countries (in fact, three times as fast as that of European countries as a whole), for three reasons: the fertility rate is higher than in most of these countries; age structure is more conducive to rapid growth, as a higher proportion of the population is in the childbearing ages (resulting mainly from a sharper and more protracted postwar baby boom); and Australia has an immigration program.

It may appear easy to determine the relative importance of natural increase and net migration in the growth of the Australian population; and indeed, from a simple accounting perspective, it is. Successive waves of immigration boosted population growth—in the late 1870s and 1880s, from 1910 to 1930 (broken by World War I), again from the late 1940s through the 1960s, and following a migration slump in the 1970s, again in the early and late 1980s. Figure 1 shows the relative contribution of natural increase and net migration each year over the past 47 years.

On recent trends, we can say that in 1988 net migration exceeded natural increase, in 1989 their contribution to the rate of population increase of 1.5 per cent was almost identical, and by 1993 the decline in immigration meant that immigration accounted for only 20 per cent of the population increase of 1 per cent. However, it is not quite as simple as this. The contribution of migration is more profound than is apparent from Fig. 1. Migration builds up the population on which natural increase is based. Natural increase, then, would be much lower were it not for the migrants who have become part of the population in earlier years; the contribution of migration, in this sense, is greater the longer the period we are considering. For example, immigrants and their children born in Australia were responsible for almost 60 per cent of national population growth between 1947 and 1973 (Borrie, 1994: Table 10.2).

Even greater complexity arises when we try to disaggregate the relative contribution of natural increase, international migration and internal migration in the growth of population
in different States and localities in Australia. What we do know is that in general, international migration is heavily focused on capital cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne, whereas internal migration is heavily focused on Queensland and Western Australia. Both Melbourne and Sydney lose part of their large net gain from overseas migration as a result of the net loss of their Australian-born population, especially to Queensland and Western Australia. Sydney was the destination of 40 per cent of the immigration intake between 1986 and 1991, but it experienced a net internal migration loss of 142 000 in this same period (Burnley, 1996).

It is important to recognise that, although natural increase continues to contribute a relatively stable growth of approximately 0.8 per cent annually to the Australian population, fertility has been below replacement level for the past 20 years. It is only because the numbers in the reproductive ages have been swollen during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the postwar baby boom that natural increase has remained as high as it has.\(^3\) Once the age and sex structure of the population settles down to fully reflect the below-replacement fertility level, natural increase of the population will be negative.\(^4\) However, population projections indicate that unless fertility declines further, natural increase of the population will remain positive for at least the next 40 years (Jing Shu et al., 1996, Chapter 6), though it will of course gradually contribute much less than its recent 0.8 per cent annually. The projected births and deaths until 2051 are shown in Fig. 2.

**Figure 2: Projected Births and Deaths 1996–2051 (Series A)**

![Births and Deaths Chart](image_url)

Source: Rowland, 1997, Fig. 1.
Definitions of Population Policy

In a later section, the recommendations of different official Australian population enquiries will be summarised. The definitions of population policy used in these enquiries have varied. The National Population Inquiry report of 1975 noted that in the broadest sense, assuming that the primary function of government is to serve the perceived needs of the people, a population policy is as broad as government policy at large. In the narrower sense, however, the Inquiry argued that we can take a positive or a passive approach towards population. The positive approach assumes that population variables (marriage, fertility, migration, etc.) can be manipulated through policy measures to achieve goals which society at large, or government on its behalf, believes desirable and attainable. The passive approach is geared instead to adapting to the population trends which the society is experiencing.

Although the National Population Inquiry was prepared to accept that the passive approach is a kind of population policy, I believe that the broad spectrum of government policies in any country is designed to serve the existing and anticipated population, and should not be considered ‘population policy’, a term better reserved for policies designed to influence population trends (including trends in population composition and quality) themselves.

The Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council in 1991 used the following definition of a population policy (NPC, 1992: ix):

A population policy is one whereby government seeks to anticipate and respond to population trends and prospects in the light of their impacts and anticipates impacts of public policy on population trends themselves. It also directly seeks to influence the determinants of population in order to deliberately alter the size and/or nature of the population.

The report made it clear that population policy could embrace not only population numbers and growth but also its distribution and characteristics.

Perhaps the best concise definition of population policy is that of McNicoll (1995: 97): ‘...a coherent vision of the desired demographic future and a co-ordinated set of actions designed to move towards it’.

Has Australia Had a Population Policy in Postwar Years?

Although calls for a population policy usually include the adjectives ‘full-fledged’ or ‘comprehensive’, implying attention to a range of population issues, in fact population policies can be very simple. The core issue in most countries is the rate of population growth, or the ultimate population size, that is aimed for. Therefore it has been argued
(Australian Population and Immigration Council, 1977) that Australia did have a population policy from the early postwar years until the Whitlam government abolished it in the early 1970s: the ‘2 per cent target’ for population growth, which envisaged that immigration and natural increase would each contribute about half the annual growth rate.

The 2 per cent target could only be considered a medium-term target, since over the long run a rate of growth of 2 per cent would lead to a doubling of the population every 35 years, and this could hardly be envisaged for very long. Nevertheless, it remained the basis for managing population increase for more than 25 years, without the acknowledgment of any need to specify what ultimate population size was envisaged. The view of the planners was clearly that the desired size was ‘much larger than at present’, thus obviating the requirement to specify the ultimate target, at least in the short to medium term. Two things have changed since that time. First, Australia’s population has more than doubled, so some of those who wanted a ‘much larger’ population may now think that this ‘much larger’ population has been reached. Secondly, a more pessimistic view prevails about Australia’s longer-term prospects, with the emergence of high unemployment levels and increasing concern about environmental issues, and it is probably true to say that in popular thinking, the size of population considered desirable for Australia is smaller than it was thirty or forty years ago.

Since the abolition of the 2 per cent goal in the early 1970s, Australia has been in the curious situation of having an official immigration policy, with annual targets, but without an explicit goal for growth. An implicit growth goal can be inferred from the migration targets, because the ‘base’ of natural increase has remained quite stable over the past 20 years (see Fig. 1). But the fact that the net migration targets implied by settler intake targets have fluctuated quite markedly (dropping from well over 100 000 annually in the late 1960s and early 1970s to 10 000 or 20 000 in 1975, the last year of the Whitlam government, then rising again to 70 000 a year under the Fraser government, dipping again in the mid-1980s and reaching another major peak under the Hawke government in the late 1980s) implies that the immigration targets are influenced more by short-term economic considerations, refugee crises, broader ideological considerations of new governments, and the preferences of particular Prime Ministers and Ministers for Immigration than by long-term population building strategies.

Since the mid-1970s, Australia’s immigration targets have implied acceptance of an increasing population size, but without specifying just how rapidly that size should be increasing. On the whole, emphasis has been more on responding to population change than influencing it. In this respect, Australia has not differed from most countries of Europe. But although these countries resemble Australia in not having specific population policies, they differ from Australia in not having official immigration programs designed to increase the size of their populations. Therefore it makes more sense for them to adopt a ‘laissez faire’ approach to fertility and mortality, allowing these to settle at the levels resulting from various health and social policies, without explicitly considering the desired
population growth rate or ultimate size. But in Australia’s case, logic suggests the need to be more explicit about desired population growth rates.

**Australian Population Inquiries**

Australia has had a number of national population inquiries. The first and most comprehensive was the National Population Inquiry (NPI), often referred to as the ‘Borrie Commission’, which worked over the early 1970s and presented its main report to the government in 1975 and a supplementary report in 1978. In December 1991 the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council presented its report entitled *Population Issues and Australia’s Future* to the government. Then in December 1994 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies presented its report on *Australia’s Population ‘Carrying Capacity’*.

The National Population Inquiry was not asked to establish an ‘optimum’ population for Australia, nor indeed to recommend specific population policy. On the other hand, it was asked to examine the ‘desirable future population levels which emerge from its analysis’, and ‘to produce results that would contribute usefully to the formulation and application of national policies’. Given this wide leeway, and the considerable time and resources placed at its disposal, it is not surprising that the National Population Inquiry did indeed range very widely, and in terms of academic content stands up very well against comparable inquiries commissioned in countries such as the United States (the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future) and the United Kingdom (the Royal Commission on Population, reporting in 1949, and the Population Panel of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, reporting in 1973).

The National Population Inquiry in its 1975 report noted that opinions would differ about whether continued population growth or a stationary population is desirable, and that this is a matter that cannot be definitively proved one way or another. Although the Inquiry did not espouse either ‘zero population growth’ or ‘unlimited growth’, and refused to define an optimum population for Australia, it did argue that at least a doubling of the 1971 population (12.8 million) was ‘feasible and, in some respects, desirable’ (Borrie, 1994: 267). It did not find the idea of a population of 50 or 60 million alarming, stating that it ‘seems feasible and manageable’ (Borrie, 1978: 180). But basically the NPI endorsed a policy of responding to population trends rather than actively influencing them.

The Population Issues Committee concluded that ‘it is inappropriate to enunciate an optimum population level or a carrying capacity for Australia’. Although a population number could perhaps be determined that in some way reflected the ‘carrying capacity’ of the country in terms of ecologically sustainable development, the Committee concluded that the need to introduce attitudinal and preferential factors in determining an optimum
would mean that ideas about the optimum would vary and no single national optimum population would be accepted by the entire existing population.

According to the Committee, the proper purpose of any population policy must be the enhancement of well-being for Australia, where well-being is reflected in four national goals. The goals are economic progress, ecological integrity, social justice and responsible international involvement. After reviewing the impact of population on major national goals, the Committee recommended ‘that the Commonwealth Government develop a population policy as a matter of priority’, one which seeks to influence and respond to population change so as to advance the four goals just noted.

Ideas of optimum population die hard, and it was only a few years later that, spurred perhaps by the consignment of the recommendations of the Population Issues Committee to the filing cabinets, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies, chaired by Barry Jones, conducted an inquiry into Australia’s population ‘carrying capacity’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies, 1994: 120-126). The Jones Committee did not come down in favour of any particular size, but it did recommend that an official population policy should be developed. ‘The Australian Government should develop a population policy which explicitly sets out a range of options for long term population change, emphasising that year by year decisions on immigration intake cannot be taken in an ad hoc fashion without recognising incremental effects downstream’ (Jones Report: 125).

The committee established to prepare Australia’s submission to the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 discussed issues of population policy. Despite some members’ strong arguments for Australia’s adoption of a population policy, the official position, stated in the submission, was as follows: ‘The Australian Government has not specified an optimal population level for a number of reasons. Chiefly, there is no clear formula for a workable population policy in a developed country with low fertility’ (Woolcott, 1994: 29). Elsewhere in the report the lack of policy is further justified on the ground of the diversity of community views as to the character and objectives of a population policy.

**Major Interest Groups, Organisations, Arguments and Areas of Contention**

One thing that is absolutely clear from the evidence of submissions to population inquiries, letters to newspapers, and the air time given on radio and television to people with an interest in population-related matters is that a national consensus is unlikely to develop around issues such as the appropriate long-term population size or the appropriate population growth rate. By extension, a consensus is unlikely to emerge on related issues such as the appropriate net migration target or the appropriate size of Australia’s major
cities. The migration debate, however, has many dimensions other than that of population size; it encompasses passionately held views on the appropriate balance between different kinds of migration (refugee, family reunion, skills-based selection) and the appropriate ethnic composition of the Australian population. Some say it is socially responsible to emphasise refugee migration, others to emphasise family reunion, others to emphasise skills and expected contribution to Australia’s skills-based economy. Some want to limit diversity in the population, others argue that increasing diversity will be good for Australia.

Given the wide range of issues included under the rubric of population policy, it is not surprising that many organised groups exist in Australia to promote particular views on one or more of these issues. Perhaps the best known of these groups are Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, Australians Against Further Immigration, and various migrant lobby groups, under their umbrella organisation, the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia. Other groups such as the Australian Conservation Foundation frequently have something to say on population issues as well. Organisations such as the Housing Industry Association clearly have an interest in a higher rather than a lower immigration intake.

In evidence to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies, estimates of a long-term sustainable population for Australia ranged between 5 million and 150 million. Given this extraordinary range, consensus is unlikely, though provision of more information and the holding of educational campaigns might be expected to narrow the range somewhat.

Issues Requiring Further Examination in Moving towards a Population Policy

If Australia is to develop a sensible population policy, with the greatest possible degree of community support, then those issues which remain controversial need to be further examined, and those on which there is inadequate information need to be researched or quantified.

What are some of these issues?

Activist or Responsive Approach?

One key underlying issue is whether we need an activist or a responsive (passive) approach to population policy. The responsive approach is essentially to let demographic trends and patterns take their course, to monitor them and to bend social and economic policy to adapt to them. Given the quality of census, vital registration and migration data
in Australia, it is possible to monitor population trends fairly well. Adaptation of social and economic policy is complicated by the lack of ‘smoothness’ in the population. The nuptiality and fertility peaks of the 1950s generated a large birth cohort which is still working its way through middle age and generating echo effects which planning must adapt to. Dramatic ups and downs in immigration, and shifts in major migrant source countries, also have important planning implications. Effective adaptation of social and economic policy to demographic trends requires careful and systematic analysis of the trends and their implications.

But despite such complications, responsive approaches to population are much easier than activist approaches. The key problems with responsive approaches in the Australian context are, however, first, that they imply that society as a whole is reasonably contented with the outcome of ‘letting nature take its course’; and secondly, that the immigration program means that we are not actually ‘letting nature take its course’. The continuation of a substantial immigration program seems to logically require the elaboration of a set of goals for population size, composition and distribution to provide an appropriate framework for the decisions that are taken annually with respect to immigration targets. Whether the formulation of such goals necessarily implies a broader activist stance on population is a moot point. It is logically conceivable that an activist stance would be taken only with regard to immigration targets. But it also appears logical to argue that, if activism is appropriate with respect to immigration, it should also be contemplated with respect to other forces influencing the size, composition and distribution of the population.

Activist population policy, however, is also problematic. As already discussed, it raises the issue of defining appropriate and nationally acceptable goals for controversial matters such as total population size at some given time, population growth rates, relative size of cities, and so forth. Also, ‘even if a goal is accepted, the demographic and political consequences of measures applied to reach that goal are likely to prove very uncertain and very unpredictable. For example, populations have proved to be notoriously unresponsive to measures designed to raise their natural growth rate’ (Borrie, 1975: 707). Migrants, likewise, do not necessarily go to those places which seek them.

Interventions to Influence Fertility?

In recent times in Australia, it has been accepted without question that fertility is not an appropriate focus of policy: decisions about childbearing are private matters.\(^5\) Eschewing of activism with regard to fertility has flowed readily from the stability of total fertility rates (TFRs) at about 1.8 (below replacement level but generating positive rates of population growth because of the age structure). After all, natural increase is positive and further growth, if desired, can be generated through migration. The main arguments about
fertility have been from the environmentalist side, arguing the need for lower fertility. Higher fertility has not had a constituency.

The stability of fertility rates (TFR of just over 1.8 since 1984) should not lull us into a false certainty that fertility will never need to be the subject of activist attention, however. Recent demographic events in Europe could be harbingers of future trends in Australia. In much of Europe, TFRs have sunk to 1.5 or below, and in some countries (Italy, Spain and Germany) to extraordinarily low levels of 1.2. Although this has not yet led to significant population declines, this is only because of the same kinds of age structure effects that have held Australian natural increase rates in positive territory. In time, however, fertility rates as low as those of Italy, Spain and Germany will lead to accelerating declines in population size; if we can talk of a ‘population explosion’ resulting from high fertility in countries such as Pakistan, we can equally justifiably forecast a ‘population collapse’ in countries with very low fertility.6

Up to now, there have been no clear signs that fertility will automatically ‘right itself’ in these European countries. European governments may reconcile themselves to a declining population, although the ageing implications of their prospective trends are worrisome, to say the least. Alternatively, they may decide to develop immigration policies that will redress some of the population shortfall, though the increasing xenophobia in Europe would suggest real problems because of the likely sources of those migrants. But in the longer run, if fertility rates remain stubbornly low, it is hard to imagine that serious pronatalist policies will not be devised, notwithstanding the relative failure of such policies in the past.

The implications of these European trends for Australia are not yet clear. Fertility has risen somewhat in certain European countries in recent times, and could conceivably do so in Australia. Whether to predict rising, steady or declining fertility into the future in Australia requires a theory of the determinants of childbearing patterns. But I believe the balance of probability is that fertility levels in Australia will fall further, thus carrying the seeds of eventual substantial population decline.

McDonald (1997) has argued that very low fertility in many advanced countries results from differential levels of gender equity. Gender equity is more advanced in countries whose institutions deal with women as individuals than in those where women are dealt with as mothers and members of families. In some countries women have achieved near-equal conditions in education and market employment, but the male breadwinner model remains paramount in the family itself, in services provision, in tax-transfer systems and in industrial relations. Although the latter three can be addressed by legislative and other means, intra-family relationships and idealised family values remain resistant to change. Persistence of highly traditional views on these matters may explain the particularly low fertility in the Mediterranean countries of Europe, where conservative attitudes to the
family face women with the dilemma of potentially losing the benefits of educational and employment equity once they start to have children.

If McDonald's argument is correct, the future course of fertility in Australia will depend importantly on the extent of further progress in creating family-friendly industrial relations, tax and social welfare policies, along with progress in gender equity within the family. The attitude that having children is a purely personal decision, and that those having the children should bear all the costs, will result in further declines in fertility. In time, such fertility declines would lead to substantial contraction in population size in the absence of very large migration programs. If this outcome is not desired, fertility may eventually come to be viewed, not as a purely personal decision, with few externalities to worry about, as at present, but as an act of patriotism, greatly to be encouraged.

Need for Wider Range and Better Interpretation of Population Projections

The issue of future fertility trends brings us to another matter creating considerable controversy in discussions of Australia's population future: the interpretation of population projections. Projections are simply exercises to estimate the future consequences of particular assumptions about the trends in the determinants of population growth: fertility, mortality and migration. Many individuals and agencies make projections, for different purposes. The variability in migrant intake, both from year to year and in relation to official targets, should alert us to the likelihood that reality will be at variance with the projections, even over a fairly short period. Longer-term projections are simply scenarios, showing what will happen if the assumptions are followed. It is important that projections be interpreted accurately and with understanding of their underlying structure.

Recently there has been a controversy about whether 'current levels of immigration' will lead to population stabilising at 23 million in 25 to 35 years' time (as claimed by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock) or whether it would lead to population reaching 28.3 million in 2051 and still be growing (AESP Newsletter, 1997). Such controversies should be fairly easy to resolve. In this case they appear to hinge on the meaning of 'current levels of immigration', because as mentioned earlier, net migration fluctuates from year to year. The Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population and the Jones Committee report on 'Australia's Population Carrying Capacity' both cite ABS projections indicating that the 23 million ceiling would require that net immigration fall immediately to 50 000, less than half its recent level. But it must be borne in mind that ABS revises its population projections biennially. The latest set (ABS 1996) indicates that the net migration level of 50 000 and fertility about 10 per cent below replacement would lead to a population of 24.5 million in 2051 (see Fig. 3). The reason for the higher figure, of course, is that net migration levels had been much above 50 000 annually since the
previous projections, thus increasing the population base on which the new projections were computed (Young, 1997b).

What is usually ignored in arguments about likely population trends is that most sets of projections in Australia utilise only one fertility assumption, or at most a very narrow range of fertility scenarios. The range of possible outcomes becomes wider when a wider band of alternative fertility scenarios are used in addition to alternative migration scenarios. The earlier discussion about possible trends in Australian fertility suggests that more alternatives should be built into official projections, because the implicit assumption that fertility is not likely to change very sharply in Australia may be incorrect.
Rowland (1997: 42–43) has argued for the construction of sets of population projections combining national and subnational figures in a way that permits comparisons and evaluation of the regional impacts of demographic trends over a ten year period. This would include metropolitan and regional projections based on useful planning boundaries. Demographic components of growth would be identified for each region.

Resources and Environmental Impacts

A study of Australia's carrying capacity (Newman, 1994) reached the conclusion that our supplies of water, fibre and electricity are adequate for a population of 100 million or more. Our land-based food production capacity is enough for a population of 45 million people. But we already exceed our carrying capacity in timber, fisheries and oil (Lowe, 1996: 15). None of these facts points clearly towards optimum population size, since international trade can redress resource insufficiencies. Population size and distribution bears rather direct relationships to urban air quality, and disposal problems for garbage and sewerage; drinkable water is a problem for a city like Adelaide; pollution of the marine environment near our large cities is a serious problem. But it can be argued that these are essentially issues of environmental management.

The lack of consensus on the size of a sustainable population in Australia indicates that further research on the set of issues related to sustainability—and quality of life—is urgently needed. The problem is that population growth 'is only one of a long list of social processes and/or activities customarily seen as contributing to losses in the environmental component of quality of life' (Cocks, 1996: 94). Therefore in modelling the impact of population growth on quality of life, a technical approach is needed which allows the effect of population change to be both quantified and convincingly separated from a range of confounding factors—not an easy task.

In the absence of conclusive evidence on the environmental consequences of population growth, the following statement from Cocks (1996: 133) might be taken as a tentative summary: 'Population growth is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for environmental degradation; it is, however, a strong predisposing factor'.

Immigrant Settlement Patterns and Internal Population Movements

There is a range of issues revolving around the settlement patterns of immigrants and the internal population movement of the Australian born and of immigrants following their initial placement. As noted earlier, immigrant groups settle in Sydney and Melbourne in disproportionate numbers, thus placing considerable strain on their infrastructure and housing (Burnley and Murphy, 1994). By contrast, internal population movement focuses
particularly on Queensland and Western Australia, which attract migrants particularly from the southern States of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia. It is sometimes argued that if there were less immigration, there would be less movement northwards by people from Sydney and Melbourne, because the strain placed by immigrants on the infrastructure of these cities and their effect on inflation of housing prices would be lessened. The inflation of housing prices enables Sydney residents, especially on retirement, to sell their house and move to a better one elsewhere at the same price.

Temporary International Population Movements

Traditionally, population debates in Australia have focused only on the permanent population of Australia. But with the increase in tourism, globalisation and its attendant transitory workers, and in the number of secondary and tertiary students from overseas, there is a need to consider the costs and benefits of these temporary movements. People here temporarily do not have the same impact as permanent residents, but in some matters their impact is similar. For example, in terms of crowding of resorts or the strain on transport systems in holiday seasons, it does not make much difference whether the holiday-makers are from Australia or overseas. In terms of housing pressures in cities, an overseas student population of, say, 30,000 demonstrably imposes strains, even if all of the 30,000 will have returned home in three years’ time, only to be replaced by 30,000 new students.

Tourism is now one of our major industries, and brings more export income than the wool or beef industry. The point is, however, that this revenue comes with a cost (just as it does in the case of the wool and beef industries), and the cost needs to be weighed appropriately when planning the future of the tourist industry.

How Much Strain Does Non-European Migration Place on Social Cohesion?

Much of the justification for large-scale immigration has arisen from security considerations (in the early post-World War II period) and subsequently from economic considerations—the idea that population growth and increasing scale is good for the economy. However, as economist Judith Sloan has expressed it, ‘ultimately, immigration policy should be about the kind of society we want, not about economics’ (Sloan, 1994). She might have added that it is also about humanitarian concerns—at least the refugee component of the policy.

Strains on social cohesion are not easy to measure. Italian and Greek migrants in the 1950s had generally poor English skills, a tendency to retain their own language into the second generation, and low intermarriage rates with the rest of the Australian population
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(Price, 1993; Khoo, 1995). The strain this placed on social cohesion could well have been greater than that imposed by recent non-European migrants, a substantial proportion of whom are well educated, speak fluent English and are more familiar with British-derived institutions. Particular Asian migrant groups, for example Indo-Chinese refugees and some of the migrants from the Philippines and China qualifying under the family reunion category, do, however, include a considerable proportion who arrive with poor English language skills, limited education and very different cultural backgrounds. Such groups impose strains, not only on the social fabric through being demonstrably 'different', but also on social services through the need for interpreter services, special English language programs, and so forth. Yet until recently, Australia has coped remarkably well with the strains imposed by all these 'different' groups of migrants, be they European or non-European.

Given the recent prominence of the controversy over Asian immigration, however, the issue of ethnic difference as a focus of prejudice must be addressed head-on. The controversies over the past year triggered by Pauline Hanson's maiden speech in Parliament indicate that the malevolent influence of a rather crude kind of racism is still present in Australia—as in most other countries (Jones, 1997).

The race issue is of the utmost importance in reaching a consensus on Australian national identity. The importance of race with specific regard to Australian population policy is that a non-discriminatory immigration policy, in which education, skills, and English language are given high priority, and which also has a humanitarian, refugee component, will inevitably include a large proportion of migrants from Asia. In recent years, this component has ranged between one-third and one-half. If a large intake of non-European migrants poses problems of social cohesion, as argued by Blainey (1984), then a large-scale immigration policy, even if desirable on other grounds, might be precluded by social cohesion considerations.

These days, public support for immigration appears to be waning, for a number of reasons. There is growing public concern over environmental issues, and, perhaps more importantly, concern as well over the high level of unemployment among some categories of migrants and a common belief (not supported by those economic studies that have examined the issue) that immigration worsens unemployment among the population at large. A convincing rationale for high-level immigration seems to be lacking in the 1990s, and finally, some are concerned about the increasing heterogeneity of the Australian population and its implications for national identity.

Although responses to questions on attitudes to immigration in general and to Asian migration in particular are difficult to interpret (Goot, 1991), recent polls indicate majority opposition to the current rate of immigration, and to the level of immigration from Asia. On the other hand, multiple issue opinion polling does not show migration to be an issue of major concern, rating 15th among issues the voters believed the government should be
addressing in the Bulletin Morgan Poll of 28 November 1995 (Millbank, 1996: 12–14). This may have changed, of course, since the Hanson controversy. But interestingly, a poll published in the Weekend Australian of 3–4 May 1997 showed overwhelming support for multiculturalism—78 per cent said they thought it had been good for Australia, compared with only 16 per cent who thought it had been bad.

It is important to know how accepting the Australian community is of newcomers. The massive postwar immigration program (larger per capita than the Canadian migration program: much larger than the US program) appears to have led to surprisingly few social problems. On the other hand, as Katherine Betts has pointed out, social cohesion is more than just an absence of crime waves, race riots and epidemics. Continued high immigration intake in a period of recession may strain social cohesion, and injury be done to democracy if public opinion is ignored. There is no question that racism does exist in Australia, ‘taking the form of abuse, harassment and even physical violence, particularly against Asians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ (Woolcott, 1994: 57). The upsurge of support for Pauline Hanson’s complaints about Asian immigration and Aboriginal welfare programs, though it reflects many things as well as racism, at the very least reveals that a non-trivial proportion of the Australian population is, if given the opportunity, willing to espouse racist views. This should under no circumstances be taken as an excuse to abandon the bipartisan support for a non-discriminatory migration program, but rather as an indication that racial harmony will need to be both monitored and actively fostered.

Price’s (1996) projections of the ethnic composition of the Australian population show that, on the assumption of roughly constant fertility and the levels and patterns of migration of recent years, the proportion of the Australian population with an Asian (including Middle Eastern) ethnicity would rise from about 7 per cent at the moment to 19 per cent by the year 2025. Overall, the changing ethnic composition implied by a continuation of recent levels of immigration need not cause alarm; the figure of 19 per cent Asian ethnicity in 30 years’ time should be interpreted alongside the projection of 7.5 per cent Asian born in the same year. In other words, more than half the ethnic Asian population will have been born and raised in Australia, and will have been through the Australian school system. Considerably more of the population will be ethnically mixed by that time. The Australian population will be substantially different from today, and presumably better able to take ethnic diversity in its stride and, indeed, value it positively.

Other Issues Warranting Further Examination

The list of issues requiring further examination could go on and on. In the detailed discussion above, I have not included economic assessments of the benefits and costs of larger populations and of immigration programs, because there seems to be general
consensus in available studies that, on balance, immigration is good for the economy but the net benefit is small. Nor is the advantage of stable age structure included, although it is clearly relevant. Nor have I included research into perceptions in the Asia-Pacific region about Australia's population carrying capacity, although they will certainly influence the kinds of international pressures we may be placed under should major refugee crises emerge in our region. Nor have I mentioned the particular issues of Aboriginal demography, including ways to tackle the scandalously high adult mortality rates.

What Would a National Population Policy Actually Entail?

Implicit in what has already been said in this paper is the need for Australia to adopt a population policy. Reports and commissions over the years have advised government that Australia should have an explicit population policy. There has been a notable absence of outside advice to the contrary. But governments have steadfastly ignored the weight of advice.

As the country with the largest planned immigration program per head in the world, with the exception of Israel, it seems obvious that at the very least, we need to sort out our longer-term goals for population size and growth. Decisions are also needed about whether we want to modify some of the distributional trends—particularly the ever-increasing tendency for the population to perch around the coastline, as if some centrifugal force were operating to empty out inland areas of Australia.

Precautionary Principle

One of the most important underpinnings of population policy in Australia should be the precautionary principle (Cocks, 1996: 166–168). This takes various forms, but most include the argument that if any course of action might possibly have disastrous and irreversible consequences it should be rejected in favour of a course of action that does not carry this possibility. In relation to population growth, the underlying assumptions are usually that this may contain the seeds of environmental and social disaster or, at the least, of serious problems; that it does not promise any obvious economic, social or environmental benefits; and that it is irreversible for all practicable purposes. This being the case, and given the uncertainty about many of the effects of further substantial population growth, it would be wise to go for lower growth in order to hold options open. This would enable policy in the future to be more flexible than if population grows more substantially, thus foreclosing some of the options.

Adoption of a population policy would bring a greater degree of certainty to government planning and private enterprise decision making. At least some of the goals of government
would be clearer, even if the government's ability to attain those goals remained questionable. 'Establishing general demographic goals would also provide a better framework within which policies in non-demographic areas might be better developed ... For example, the policy would define the direction of changes that are linked with sustainable development, social justice, housing and human resource planning' (Rowland, 1997: 46).

Size or Growth Rate Goals

An 'active' national population policy (as defined earlier) would require, at a minimum, a goal for either population size or growth rates in the short to medium run. Long-run goals would be desirable as well, but it is possible to conceive of an interim goal that would leave long-run options open and therefore not require immediate decision. The growth rate of population is a key consideration in a whole range of planning issues at both national, regional and local levels—for example, in planning for housing developments, gauging the demand for schools and shops, building roads, planning water and electricity supplies and estimating usage of national parks and recreation areas.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies rejected the highest and lowest extremes of population size options proposed, but saw four other options—ranging between a 30 to 50 million population and reduction to somewhere in the 5 to 17 million range—as realistic options for community involvement and debate and political decision. Interestingly, however, the Standing Committee, by noting that a figure of 23 million seemed to represent a break point between the populations mentioned by those proposing population stabilisation and those wanting moderate population growth, and then noting that 'a stable population of 23 million is readily achievable with a net migration of 50 000 a year' went close to giving a degree of support to this figure. In subsequent discussion of the issue, many people (including the present Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock), seem to have settled on the 23 million figure as a focus of discussion. Such proponents of a 23 million figure include the Australian Academy of Science’s Working Party (Australian Academy of Science, 2040 Working Party, 1995).

As noted earlier, recent projections show that net migration of 50 000 a year is likely to result in population levelling off at a figure closer to 25 million than to 23 million. Whatever the precise figure, it appears at this stage to represent a 'natural' levelling off point for Australia's population, given the gradual slowing of natural increase projected over the coming few decades (see Fig. 2) and the widespread community belief that net migration should be lowered. (A number of 50 000 for net migration would enable Australia to continue a humanitarian refugee program, as well as modest family reunion and skills migration schemes). In representing an increase of about a third over Australia's
current population, it does raise environmental concerns but, given the political will, the environmental consequences should be within Australia’s capacity to manage.

Degree of Activism Required

Once a goal for growth has been determined, consideration needs to be given to whether current trends are in the right direction, in which case a laissez faire approach may be satisfactory.

A distinction can be drawn between minimalist and more intrusive population policies. In relation to matters such as fertility, a minimalist principle would seem to be in order—that is, to minimise the degree of intervention consistent with the degree of importance attached to achieving the particular goal. But if current trends are either in the wrong direction or are not considered to be moving towards desired goals quickly enough, consideration will need to be given to the leverage that can be exerted on different determinants of growth rates—basically fertility and migration. As noted earlier, deliberate attempts to modify fertility rates in Australia would be a radical development, but one that could be required in time by the force of circumstances.

Crucial Role of Migration Policy

To the extent that fertility remains immune from deliberate manipulation, and the goal of reducing mortality is a given, only migration remains as an effective instrument of policy to influence population growth. This places migration in a position of crucial importance, and in the postwar era, a migration ‘industry’ has grown up, complete with a government department to run it, lobby groups to influence it, and private practitioners earning their livelihoods by serving as migration agents. The migration tail, however, has been allowed to wag the population dog, especially since the 2 per cent growth target was given up. In particular, consideration of population policy issues in Australia will need to be focused more on matters of internal population distribution and composition.

Immigration policy will, however, continue to be the major component of population policy, and faces some major issues, for example:

- The volume of potential migration will remain much larger than available places even if stringent criteria are used for education and English language competence.

- It is impossible to fully control net outcomes—outmigration is volatile, as is trans-Tasman movement, which is visa-free. This helped account for the 1981–82 peak of immigration. (see Borrie, 1994: 269; Carmichael, 1993).
Striking a balance between the different categories of settlers is a very touchy business: for example, there is normally conflict between the economic planners and the ethnic lobbies over the balance between the skilled and family reunion categories, and possible conflict between these groups and humanitarian groups over the balance between these categories and refugees.

A significant component of the family reunion intake consists of spouses from overseas married by young Australians (Birrell, 1995). Though there are cases of fraud in this area, increased mobility of the population will result in an increase in genuine marriages of this kind which deserve high priority, but which will occupy an increasing share of the overall immigration intake if this intake is held at relatively low levels.

Bipartisan consensus over the past 25 years over the need for a non-discriminatory migration policy now faces the challenge of the politicization of the ‘race debate’. It is very important that this bipartisan consensus be maintained.

Population Distribution and Quality

Turning now to issues of population distribution, the appropriateness or otherwise of current trends in redistribution will need to be assessed (for example, the rapid growth of Southeast Queensland and the north coast of NSW, the net loss through migration from South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria; redistribution within cities and the growth of ‘poverty belts’ (McDonald, 1995; Gregory and Hunter, 1995). If aspects of these trends are considered undesirable, it would again be necessary to look for instruments to modify them. In principle, a minimalist rather than an intrusive policy would be favoured.

What about population quality? In some circles, such terms are suspect, redolent of discredited policies of fascist regimes. But if population quality is taken to refer mainly to the education and health of the population, the issue is not whether interventions to improve these characteristics are appropriate, but rather whether such matters are appropriately included under the rubric of population policy. As in many other matters relating to population policy, the marking out of ‘turf’ becomes important, and the question of how population policy relates to social policy and educational policy will need to be resolved. ‘Turf’ is equally important, of course, in the area of population distribution, as policies in this area will involve industrial location, regional development and tourism policies, among others. Basically, people (plus their dependants) go where the jobs are, with the important exception of retirement migration.

In the past, the goal of ethnic homogeneity was a key goal of population policy, lying at the heart of the White Australia Policy. No longer is such a goal officially acceptable: Australia’s entry policy, although it is selective according to economic and social criteria,
is non-discriminatory on the basis of race, ethnicity and national origin. Many in the community still believe that ethnic homogeneity is an appropriate goal. Such people may try to achieve the aim indirectly, by advocating holding down the migration intake. This would be the only way to limit the growth of the non-European population, because unless Australia reverts to some sort of ethnic or racial quotas, it seems likely that non-Europeans will continue to make up at least a third or a half of the migration intake. But of course, many of those who want to hold down the immigration intake do so for other reasons—in particular, for motives of environmental sustainability.

With respect to population quality, the goals of raising the educational and skill levels of the population have widespread support. This can be achieved both through improvements in the educational system in Australia and through maintaining high standards for education and skills among those accepted as migrants. However, the family migration category is problematic, because educational levels are generally lower in this category, but many—e.g. marriage partners—can enter Australia as a matter of right. Other much more controversial quality-related goals can be imagined, made possible by genetic engineering, which governments may have to deal with more directly in future.

In the end, population policy is a political matter, but to paraphrase Barry Jones, we cannot really avoid having a policy. Either we have ‘no policy’ (actually an eyes-closed policy, with impacts on population nevertheless arising from a range of other policies we adopt) or we establish a population policy (an eyes-open policy).

Integration of Population Policy with Other Areas of Public Policy and Planning

One reason for reluctance in political and public service circles to undertake development of a full-fledged population policy is that the formulation and implementation of such a policy would involve many different arms of government, because population policy cuts across the jurisdiction of so many agencies—those dealing with immigration, the family and social welfare, education, health, employment, regional development, and urban planning, to name just some. It is sometimes argued that population policy is already taken care of in an implicit way by these agencies carrying out their separate functions, and that it would be best to leave it that way.

There is some force to this argument. The fact that there is not a fully articulated population policy does not mean that relevant activities are not being carried out. On the other hand, the understanding of ‘population policy’ by those arguing that ‘it’s all being done through existing mechanisms’ tends to be one-sided: i.e. adapting to change in population circumstances. I argued earlier that such passive approaches to population should not be considered population policy. The total efforts of the various government agencies probably deal reasonably well with adapting to population trends. But they
certainly do not add up to an adequate coordinated effort to assess whether population trends are desirable and to modify those that are not. Furthermore, to cite the highly pertinent conclusion of a review of population in New Zealand, ‘no agency has a sufficiently wide scope of activity in population areas to be able to adequately brief government on population matters in general, and on the extent to which population issues permeate the programs and responsibilities of a number of agencies’ (New Zealand Interdepartmental Committee on Population Policy Guidelines, 1990: 54).

The issue facing Australia is whether a kind of ‘muddling through’ approach, aimed mainly at adapting to population trends, is good enough (indeed, perhaps the ‘least worst’ approach, given the lack of community consensus on many aspects of population policy), or whether the lack of specific attention to population issues as such is likely to distort the policies actually adopted insofar as their population impacts are concerned.

As the National Population Council’s Population Issues Committee (1992: 114) states: coordination between those public bodies which need to influence or to respond to population trends is necessary in order to:

• understand and anticipate those trends

• develop policy on a consistent basis

• propose timely policy adjustments to population itself in the light of the impacts identified

• draw on effective community consultation and expert information in this process.

One possible way around the need for coordination that avoids major changes in bureaucratic structures and issues of ‘turf’ may be to adopt the major recommendation of the Jones Committee report: to establish a Cabinet Committee on Population, to be serviced by a small secretariat in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. This would ensure that important population issues would be brought before Cabinet (through its Structural Adjustment Committee), and, in turn, that needed actions would be carried out by other departments. The present situation is unsatisfactory in that the Department of Immigration, which is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as being in the advocacy business in immigration and multicultural matters, is also in effect driving Australia’s population policy. Although immigration is a major instrument of population policy, immigration policy and population policy should be kept distinct.

In developing a suitable mechanism for the formulation and implementation of population policy, not only must issues of the mandate of different Commonwealth Government agencies be resolved, but agreement needs to be reached between the three tiers of government in Australia (Federal, State and local) on the objectives of population policy. This will not be easy, because the dynamics of population change differ widely between the States and even more widely between local government areas, leading to significant
differences in perspective. The principle should be for national issues to be dealt with by the Commonwealth, and as much autonomy as possible left to State and local government over matters directly affecting them. Even at the local government level, sharp differences of opinion will be faced on matters of population policy—as can be seen, for example, between growth and anti-growth lobbies in some local government areas on the north coast of NSW.

The need for effective community consultation and expert advice has typically been dealt with in Australia by the appointment of advisory bodies on population, but the history of such bodies has been a chequered one. A succession of Australian governments has put in place a variety of advisory bodies, but their life expectancy has been limited. For example, from 1949 there was an Immigration Planning Council, whose main task was to advise on the annual immigration intake, but which looked to some extent at issues broader than those of immigration (mainly geographic distribution issues, as birth rates were relatively high and not considered a policy target). Later its name was changed to the Population and Immigration Council to reflect this broader interest. Subsequently, in addition to this Council, an Immigration Advisory Council was set up, mainly dealing with settlement issues, and later a Refugee Advisory Council. During the Whitlam years, an advisory group was set up on matters of urbanisation and decentralisation.

In 1981, the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs was established, following a recommendation of the 1977 Green Paper (Australian Population and Immigration Council, 1977). In 1987 it was restructured and renamed the National Population Council (NPC). The NPC produced a major report, *Population Issues and Australia's Future*, in 1992, but it was subsequently disbanded, apparently partly because the Minister at the time was uncomfortable with its overly academic membership. Some members of a national committee appointed to prepare Australia's submission to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 recommended to Government (though of course this recommendation is not contained in its report for the Cairo Conference) that a committee be re-established to advise government on population issues. However, this recommendation was ignored, and the government is currently without direct outside advice on population policy issues. The lack of input is exacerbated by the disbanding of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research in 1996, not so long after 'population' was added to its mandate as one of the few recommendations in *Population Issues and Australia's Future* that was acted upon.

There are certainly committees and consultative forums advising government on related matters: for example, the Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs; the Inter-governmental Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development; and the National Ecologically Sustainable Development/Greenhouse Intergovernmental Roundtable Conference. While these all have something to contribute to the population debate, the danger of relying on them for advice on population policy matters is that each of them views population issues from particular, and limited, perspectives.
The Ecologically Sustainable Development Discussion Process, initiated by the government in 1990, has been a gloomy one for proponents of population policy. The Intersectoral Issues Report, produced in 1992 as part of this process, endorsed the recommendations of the Population Issues Committee, which had reported at the end of 1991. But the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (1992), produced subsequently by government officials, did not endorse the development of a formal population policy for Australia, but merely referred to an objective to 'establish the most effective mechanism for ensuring the impacts of population are reflected in public policy making' through enhanced co-ordination and information sharing (ibid: 96). Harding (1995: 176) comments that government responses at this time and subsequently 'appear to have been aimed at ensuring marginalisation of population in actions arising from the ESD discussion process'.

There is, I believe, a strong case for an ongoing body with wide expert and community representation to advise government on population matters, something akin to the former National Population Council. It should be stressed that such an ongoing mechanism for the systematic consideration of population issues would be useful whether or not the government decided to formulate a comprehensive population policy.

**What Would Be Entailed in Implementing a Population Policy?**

Depending on the particular policy adopted, a range of activities might need to be constrained, and others encouraged, in order to reach the goal. Suppose, for example, that Australia decided on a simple policy with five main elements:

- try to constrain growth within a 25 million ceiling
- try to restrain the growth of Sydney, Melbourne and South-East Queensland in favour of smaller cities
- aim for social harmony among Australia's diverse and multi-ethnic population
- raise the educational and skill levels of the population
- encourage more efficient use of limited natural resources.

Clearly, a wide range of policies might contribute to achieving these goals. Immigration policy would remain very important, bearing directly on each of the goals. Educational policy, macro and microeconomic policy, industrial location policy, tourism policy, and a whole range of policies in the social and family area (bearing particularly on fertility but also on migrant assimilation and adjustment) would be relevant here. We might, perhaps, draw a parallel between population policy in Australia and in countries of South-East Asia.
In the latter, family planning programs and broader programs of education, women’s empowerment, etc. are seen to set the appropriate context for desirable population trends. Similarly, in the Australian context, the issue may become that of emphasising those aspects of economic, social and family policy, seen as good for other reasons, that are expected to have the most desirable spin-offs in maintaining near-replacement level birth rates, leading to slower metropolitan growth, holding back sunbelt migration, etc.

Whether or not Australia adopts an official population policy, we clearly need both high quality and well focused research on the issues involved and further public discussion and debate (as dispassionate as possible, but heated if needs be, given the strong views surrounding many of the issues involved). With the demise of the BIMPR (which, notwithstanding many criticisms of its emphases in conducting and funding research, did facilitate a considerable volume of quality migration-related research in Australia), there is a need to devise a mechanism for ensuring that research relevant to population policy formulation is carried out. It is unfortunate that so few centres for population and migration research exist in Australia, and that some of them have recently been forced to close or ‘downsize’.

Conclusion

Unlike most developing countries, most Western countries do not have an articulated population policy. But then most, unlike Australia, do not have a substantial and long-term migration program. Australia’s population policy is implicit in its immigration program, but it is a policy by stealth, a policy without consensus, and a highly erratic policy, as exemplified by the wild swings in immigration targets over time. This is not a satisfactory situation. More transparency over long-term aims is needed, and if it turns out that the fluctuations in annual settler arrival targets under different Ministers for Immigration have been based more on gut feelings than on fine tuning in relation to economic and social conditions, then that needs to be more apparent to the general public, too. Population policy has to be seen as much more than immigration policy.

The following arguments are sometimes raised against the adoption of a population policy for Australia: (1) there is no public consensus about goals for such a policy; (2) there is no clear formula for such a policy in a developed country with low fertility; and (3) population policy cuts across the jurisdiction of many government agencies and de facto is already taken care of by these agencies carrying out their separate functions. None of these arguments deals with the need, in a country with a substantial immigration program, to decide on basic goals for growth and size of population, not to mention distribution and quality goals. An infinite number of arrangements are possible for administering population policy, but what is essential is that policy be sensibly determined in the first place.
Whether or not Australia adopts a population policy, it can be argued that provision should be made for a long-term advisory body on population matters that brings together not only government agencies but also representation from academia and community groups. Population policy is important for the future of every Australian, and therefore deserves to be debated and discussed as widely as possible.

Endnotes

1. The Commission envisaged that such a goal would require antinatalist measures. But as Demeny (1986) notes, ever since that time, a stabilised population has actually carried with it the implication of pronatalist measures, since American fertility fell below replacement level and has remained there. However, population has continued to grow, not only as a result of age structure effects but also because of net immigration.

2. It did become a focus for public opinion around this time, however, fuelled by concerns about worldwide overpopulation and a visit to Australia by two-child family advocate, Paul Ehrlich. An Australian zero population growth movement developed, with strong advocates from both the physical and natural sciences as well as the social sciences (Borrie, 1994: 265–6).

3. Hugo (1988, Fig. 2.4) shows the sharp upsurge in births during the early 1980s despite more or less steady fertility levels.

4. Stated in more technical demographic language, ‘like other countries with below replacement fertility and large cohorts in middle age, Australia has positive actual growth and negative intrinsic growth’ (Rowland, 1997: 24–25).

5. For example, the Population Issues Committee (1992: 105) stated that for Australia, ‘a deliberate policy focus on manipulating fertility and family status is not an appropriate policy lever’. Gough Whitlam put it more colloquially: ‘governments should stay well out of the bedrooms of the nation’.

6. In a stable population with the level of fertility applying in 1995 in Italy, population size would drop in just 100 years to only 14 per cent of its initial level. Spanish fertility levels would imply a drop to 15 per cent of the initial level, German levels to 17 per cent and Japanese levels to 28 per cent. Even with a total fertility rate of 1.7, the level prevailing in France in 1995, a stable population would fall to 50 per cent of its initial size in a 100-year period (McDonald, 1997: 1–2).

7. The scale of migration to Australia over recent decades is reflected in recent figures on proportion of first generation immigrants in the population of various countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Australian Population Policy

Canada 15.6  
Germany 8.5  
USA 7.9  
France 6.3  
UK 3.5  


9. For example, the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong has been absorbed within the University's newly created Institute of Social Change and Critical Inquiry. The ANU’s Demography Program has been experiencing a gradual decline in University-funded staff numbers, as in other programs within the Research School of Social Sciences. The Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies in the same Research School has recently had a reprieve, but is under threat over the longer term. Macquarie University’s demography program in the Department of Actuarial Studies and Demography in the School of Economics and Financial Studies is likely to be contracted and could be under threat of closure.
References


