

Conservationists and population activists have long argued that the first step in setting an immigration policy should be to establish a population policy: what is the maximum number of people we can support over the long term, and then what lesser number do we choose to aim for, to emphasize other values beyond simply stuffing our continent as full of people as possible? Sheila Newman reports on governmental efforts in Australia to ascertain the so-called "carrying capacity." Ms. Newman is president of the Victorian (Melbourne area) branch of AESP (Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population), one of that country's main immigration reform organizations.

Australia's Carrying Capacity

By Sheila Newman

"One Nation—Two Ecologies" is the subtitle of the recently published Australian government report entitled "Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity'." The jacket illustration says it all, dividing the continent into a very large orange desert-dominated land and a much smaller series of habitable islands of green. The Committee for Long Term Strategies that conducted the inquiry into how many people Australia could comfortably support within and then beyond the next fifty years was an interparty one, chaired by the well-known parliamentarian and former TV whiz kid, Barry Jones. Jones has grown wiser since the heady days of the publication of his brilliant book, *Technology and the Future of Work*, where he told it as he felt it. He has since learned to hide his feelings.

It therefore came as no surprise that the report stopped just short of naming an optimum population figure, but instead gave seven scenarios (pp.144-145), three of which it rejected as extreme, and only one of which it rated as having any strong community support and which would be the least difficult to achieve: the "stable population option" — 17-23 million people. Any doubt about this was banished when Mr. Wakelin, Member of Parliament and member of the committee, let slip the following statement in Parliament on August 12, 1994: "The committee found that the most likely optimum population for Australia is 23 million" (*House of Representatives, Daily Hansard*, p.4570).

If the report is coy about its preferred population size, the facts elaborated lead the reader almost inexorably to the conclusion that in order to consolidate what Australians have, at near to current lifestyle and at present technology, population growth needs to stop. Although the report examines the possibility of a larger population with much lower resource use, the fact remains that Australia has so far been unable to manage to lower resource use and consumption with the population it already has.

When discussing the big population option, the report notes that "there are practically no suggestions as to how quality of life might improve with population growth. While there are many ways in which the intensification of land use which accompanies population growth can be argued to impair quality of

life, the reverse is rarely or never argued" (p.73). In addition it criticizes the discipline of economics for restricting its focus to the short and medium term. "Economics has little to say about the economic benefits of population growth in the long term" (p.74).

Recommendation #1 makes the strong statement that "political and administrative responsibility for population and immigration must be separated" because they have different goals and because "the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs is seen ... as being in the advocacy business in immigration matters and as lacking the necessary objectivity to determine population matters" (p.82).

Recommendation #10 calls for an explicit population policy and warns that "Proponents of radical change should bear the burden of proof, bearing in mind that every increase in population imposes social and environmental costs..."

Recommendations 11,14 and 15 advise that Australia should move away from its high consumer economy and recognize the impact of immigration on its indigenous population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and promote environment-sparing technological development and use, as a matter of high national priority.

The report stresses the dire need for a solid and comprehensive data base from which to project in detail the consequences of various population scenarios. As Barry Jones has said, "Otherwise we are trying to argue imponderables with imponderables." Public education is very poor in conveying the kinds of facts required to calculate the effects of population growth, and the report noted a lack of understanding in the community that the population growth of a few million that may occur over just a few years will take centuries to reverse (p.145).

Although the report is willing, at least nominally, to give consideration in its scenarios to a population as high as 50 million at subsistence level, elsewhere (p.39) under "Resource Constraints on Population Growth," it suggests that Australia should allow for a run of bad growing seasons, placing the figure at 30-35 million people if there are food constraints. It does concede, at least in theory, the possibility of importing food in

cases of scarcity, but warns that world stability cannot be guaranteed: "However it is also difficult to be confident that food could be imported for such numbers under terms of trade implying real food prices akin to today's food prices. This would depend on levels of non-food exports and the supply and demand for food on world markets in a much more populous but still orderly world" (p.40).

The report says that failure actively to choose a path is tantamount to choosing a scenario where "uncontrolled mass migration could be imposed on Australia either militarily or via an avalanche of illegal immigration... This is because the status quo is that Australia's population is currently growing rapidly (doubling every 30 to 40 years) and the short term political pressures for this to continue seem to be stronger than any countervailing pressures" pp.116-117).**

The recent decision by the Australian Federal High Court (reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of December 12, 1994, "Fear of Sterilization" p.12) allowing a Chinese couple to remain in Australia as refugees because of their fear of forcible sterilization if they returned to China, raised extremely difficult questions. Apart from the fact that there is no state policy in China of forced sterilization or abortion, and despite whatever abuses by local officials alleged there, acceptance of this couple's allegations in theory lays open the way to over a billion refugees from China. To put the situation in perspective, Australia's total population of about 18 million is equivalent to China's annual increase.

Throughout the report the need for democratic discussion and consultation to determine Australia's long term population was emphasized. This approach stands in contrast with that of the Australian Immigration Minister, Senator Bolkus, and the Ministry for Immigration, where seemingly arbitrary decisions have been handed down from on high and there has been an absolute refusal to discuss immigration policy which impinges so heavily on population numbers.

The report, "Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity', One Nation — Two Ecologies" is a very thorough work and an immensely valuable beginning to Australia's national data base on population, environment and quality of life. Although it is not perfect, it provides a basis for open and informed national debate.

Indeed this may be the first such attempt by a First World nation to evaluate a country's carrying capacity on the basis of reasoned analysis. Australia has a recent history of following American political and social trends. Perhaps this is one trend America might consider following.

Government protocol deems that the report should be dealt with and debated within six months of its release, but there is every danger of its being swept under the carpet unless Australians keep bringing it to

the attention of their social and professional bodies, their local members of parliament, and the press. Perhaps the best way to do this is to bring it to the attention of the rest of the world. ■

** I have not been able to obtain a comment regarding the basis for this doubling time, which is much faster than projected by AESP. Perhaps it is based on figures for other than permanent residents.

Copies of the report are available for purchase for Aus\$16.95 from the Australian Government Publishing Service at 347 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Australia 3000, (613) 663-3010. Ask for catalog number 9429067. Copies are also available from The Social Contract Press. Call to inquire: (616) 347-1171.

To contact the Victorian branch of AESP: Phone (613) 783-5057, FAX (613) 783-4556, or write P.O. Box 1173, Frankston, Victoria, Australia 3199.]