

A Sustainable Australia?

BY FRED ELBEL

Most foreigners consider Australia to be a strange and exotic land. Its habitat varies from lush coastline to arid interior desert and supports gigantic hopping marsupials and seemingly endless varieties of poisonous spiders and snakes. The Great Barrier Reef draws divers from around the world who immerse themselves in its magnificence. Australia's unique mammalian population has been augmented to include invasive non-indigenous procreating rabbits, camels, and other less-notable species.

The native indigenous human population, the Aborigines, have lived in primitive concert with their supporting ecosystems for at least 40,000 years. Yet today, Australia's population is projected to grow to the point of unsustainability. The book *Sleepwalking to Catastrophe* is a concise yet well-researched book, jam-packed with information, including 316 endnotes. It is an excellent point of reference for those who wish to understand Australia's population problem and the unique cultural pressures which have resulted in its current immigration situation.

Heinrichs states that:

It is the aim of this book to put the case for the 'limits to growth' position not only with respect to Australia's population growth, but for world economic growth in general. Unending economic growth is impossible on a finite planet for it will ultimately lead to ecological overshoot and destruction of the life support systems for civilisation.

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As in other more developed countries (including the United States, Canada, and most Western European countries), Australia's population growth is fuelled by its largest immigration program since the end of World War II.

In 2009, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, on the ABC television program *The 7.30 Report for 22 October*, stated that he made "no apologies" for a "Big Australia." Although Rudd later came to distance himself from those remarks, the term stuck as a depiction

of the endless growth paradigm. At the time, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) revealed that Australia's population had exceeded 22 million. Australian Treasury projections in the same year were for 35 million by 2049 —

which extrapolated to 36 million by 2050. Monash University's Centre for Population projected 42 million by 2050 — nearly double today's population.¹

Australia's growth rate currently is 2.1 percent, with the vast majority of this growth (66 percent) a direct result of overseas migration. Australia's population growth rate is double the world average and is higher than anywhere in Asia (for example, India's is 1.4 percent).

As a result of high levels of in-migration, Sydney and Melbourne will require over 430,000 hectares of land for new housing, which will result in the need to import key food stuffs by 2050. Even without immigration, Australian capital cities would still grow by approximately 50 percent within two decades, resulting in a cost per resident for congestion of \$1,000 per year.

Polls show that approximately 75 percent of Australians believe that Australia does not have the infrastructure to support such massive population growth. The book includes excerpts of an analysis by Dr. Jane O'Sullivan of the University of Queensland illustrating how the diseconomies of growth vastly outweigh its benefits. Using U.S. data, MIT economist Lester Thurow

Sleepwalking to Catastrophe
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showed that a growth rate of 1 percent would require 12.5 percent of GDP. Yet Australia is growing at 2 percent per year, thus requiring *25 percent of GDP* simply to expand its infrastructure to support people who are not yet living there — an astonishing price to pay for growth. Over 60 percent of poll respondents clearly want immigration slowed. The book points out that:

In the past the Australian immigration debate has been essentially linked with the issues of identity politics and multiculturalism, but in 2010, the battlelines were clearly drawn between a pro-growth lobby, largely comprising members of corporate Australia and its intellectual defenders, vs. a ‘limitationist’ position championed by a much smaller number of advocates.

Although this backdrop parallels that of the immigration debate in the United States, the immigration histories of the two countries differ markedly.

Australia's Immigration History

While the United States has a 200-year-plus history which embraces citizenship, it was only in 1949 when people born in Australia actually gained Australian citizenship. Prior to that they were Britons, with full allegiance to king and country. Millions of Australians went through life thinking of England — a foreign country which they had never visited — as home.



Fiona Heinrichs

That perspective changed during World War II after the fall of Singapore and Burma. Britain pulled out of the Far East and Winston Churchill asked Australia's military to divert troops to India to fight for the empire. Quite pragmatically, Australia decided to stay and fight a rear-guard action to preclude Japan's advance across New Guinea. The Japanese in fact got quite close to the Australian homeland when they captured the Solomon Islands and most of New Guinea. The Australian military planned to retreat and completely abandon all but the southeast corner of the continent, though fortunately the war moved elsewhere and the Australian mainland was never invaded.

Australia quite abruptly realized that Briton could not protect them from invasion from countries to the

north, nor protect them from the demands of other countries upon their natural resources. Australia embarked upon a plan to increase its population in self-defense, rationalizing that it would be better to fill up their country before invaders could. The result was an open-door immigration policy, expanding population from 7 million when the war ended to 18 million within a half-century.²

Migrants came from a number of European countries, particularly Greece and Italy. By 1970 Australia had 2.5 million “New Australians”.² A “White Australia” policy effectively barred Asian migration until 1970, after which Asian immigrants were openly accepted. Today Australia is a remarkably diverse and multicultural society. Heinrichs notes that although:

Humanistic assumptions underlie much of the present immigration/population debate in Australia... [it] does not follow that ‘diversity’ will be threatened by reducing a record high immigration intake, because Australia is already one of the most ethnically diverse countries on Earth — unlike China and Japan.

In other words, the diversity argument in support of mass immigration falls completely flat and is arguably less applicable in Australia than in any other country on the planet.

Promoters of Growth

The usual suspects who promote “Big Australia” parallel those promoting endless growth in the United States. Heinrichs states that:

Big Business supporters of ‘Big Australia’ include the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Industry Group and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. These rulers of our destiny all support the idea that immigration has positive economic benefits and will offset the ageing of the population.

While the Australian Treasury's official position is that “population growth ameliorates the ageing of the population,” the Treasury's own website directly counters the ageing argument fallacy, saying:

Increased migration cannot prevent our population from ageing. This is because migrants who come to Australia will age along with the rest of the population. To maintain Australia's existing age structure through immigration will require increases in immigration every year — and the increases would need to become progressively larger and larger to take account of the ageing of the migrants

themselves. While there are undoubted benefits in maintaining net overseas migration, migration cannot stop the ageing of our population.”

It is quite evident that those who stand to profit from unending growth have yet to find a convincing argument for doing so. Heinrichs concludes that:

It is clear that the major political parties, with their intimate relationship with Big Business, will continue to support our present ecologically destructive immigration program. The immigration paradigm of ‘Big Australia’ really comes down to the maximisation of short-term profits for the rich end of town, while the rest of the country burns.

Environmental Concerns

The book points out that the Global Footprint Network has calculated that humanity’s demand on Earth’s ecological support now requires 1.4 Earth’s to “generate all the resources humanity consumes and absorb all our CO2 emissions.” This is by definition ecological overshoot, in that it now takes 17-18 months for the Earth to regenerate what is used in 12 months.

A quote from Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen which underpins this perspective:

Economic development through industrial abundance may be a blessing for us now and for those who will be able to enjoy it in the near future, but it is definitely against the interest of the human species as a whole, if its interest is to have a lifespan as long as is compatible with its dowry of low entropy. In this paradox of economic growth development we can see the price man has to pay for his unique privilege of being able to go beyond the biological limits in his struggle for life.”

Reflecting on Australia’s size as an argument for population growth, Heinrichs notes that:

Viable population size is not determined on the basis of land mass and technology, but primarily on the ecological state of the environment. Such arguments are like comparing the Sahara Desert (current population approximately 2.5 million) to the U.S. (current population approximately 311 million) on the basis that both are roughly the same land mass size, subsequently concluding that with the right technology they can both support

the same population size. This will never be, no matter how much technology improves, or at the very least not soon enough to support an aggravated increase in population. Even if population were to be significantly increased without the use of much land, the quality of life within that area would be severely stressed.

As in the United States, environmental groups have a mixed attitude regarding population, often emphasizing consumption as a more important factor in the sustainability equation. In particular, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) has remained inactive on population and immigration issues.

Heinrichs proceeds to openly confront the “converging catastrophes” of Peak Oil and climate change, saying that “the two related problems interact and either is sufficient to utterly destroy the intellectual credibility of ‘Big Australia’.” While present world oil consumption is 85 million barrels per day, 113 million will be required by 2050 as a result of increased demand, particularly in India and China. Richard Heinberg’s projection of Peak Coal within 15 years clearly does not play well to the scenario of increased energy demand.

Climate change could certainly disrupt living conditions. Heinrichs observes:

The orthodox view now is that since 1980 the average global temperature has increased by approximately 0.5°C and warming is occurring at a rate of 0.16°C a decade.

The consequences could be serious and such climate change could lead to geopolitical instability in the Asia-Pacific region:

Australia’s population growth will increase its greenhouse gas emissions and in turn, climate change will largely negatively impact upon ecological capital. For example, a 2°C rise by 2060, on a conservative estimate, is likely to result in a 19 percent subsurface soil moisture reduction. Even more conventional sources such as *The Garnaut Climate Change Review* warn that climate change could lead to geopolitical instability in the Asia-Pacific region.”

As a result of climate change, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders might become eco-refugees within their homeland of Australia. Heinrichs observes that:

The prospect of collapse of the wider global framework itself puts the Australian immigration and population debate in a new per-

spective and challenges unquestioned myths, dogmas and sacred cows.

Living within Limits

The book emphasizes the importance of deflating the growth paradigm and living within ecological limits. Public figures — including businessman and environmentalist Dick Smith and former New South Wales premier Bob Carr — have become outspoken on the issue. Federal Labor Member of Parliament Kelvin Thompson has published a 14 point plan for stabilizing Australia's population which includes the following key points:

- Stabilize Australia's population at 26 million by reducing the net overseas migration program to 70,000 per annum.
- Abolish the Baby Bonus.
- Restrict the Large Family Supplement.

The solution is conceptually simple albeit politically complex. Yet the need for a change in the mentality of "growth at any cost" is imminently pressing.

Heinrichs concludes that:

It is clear that the reality of climate change, peak energy and the exploding environmental

crisis challenges the very foundations of the ideology of "Big Australia." In this context we need to move beyond the growth paradigm and the cargo cult of mass immigration. John Tanton is right in seeing that the end of the migration epoch is upon us....

The book *Sleepwalking to Catastrophe* is a must read for Australians interested in their ecological and demographic future. It also serves well to inform non-Australians of the consequences of unending growth and of the necessity of choosing a more reasoned path towards sustainability. ■

Endnotes

1. Fiona Heinrichs, *Sleepwalking to Catastrophe* (published in electronic format at www.Sleepwalking-to-Catastrophe.com, 2011).

(All data in this book review are taken directly from this book, unless noted otherwise.)

2. Bill Bryson, *In a Sunburned Country*, (Broadway Books, 2000), 157-160.

(An excellent and entertaining read for those who wish to learn more about Australia.)