Reportage:
Monday morning in Mernda

Reporter:
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Days are numbered for the Monday morning Mernda market. Last year, after operating for more than a century, the weekly livestock auction shut down. A few traders still sell live chicks, layer pullets and ducks from wire cages, and other signs of the market’s rural origins survive in stalls offering second-hand agricultural implements, bales of lucerne hay or boxes of locally grown red peppers. But the wooden saleyards are collapsing in disrepair, the corrugated roofing is decaying to rust and there is no longer any bidding on cattle, sheep or goats – the auction that originally gave people reason to gather each Monday at the rear of Mernda’s Bridge Inn Hotel (c. 1891).

What remains is a scruffy trash-and-treasure market increasingly populated by professional traders retailing fruit and veg bought wholesale in the city, or the same toyshop junk and cheap Chinese socks found in a two-dollar shop. A few ruddy blokes in broad-brimmed hats perched at the plastic table next to the dim sim van cannot hide the fact that Mernda no longer belongs to the ring of countryside draped around Melbourne – it is being tucked firmly into the city’s mortgage belt.

On the morning of my visit, just over the ridge line from the market three aquamarine excavators waved dinosaur necks, digging trenches for sewerage pipes, while a yellow bulldozer smoothed flat the land between ancient gums. The wooden skeletons of house frames stood like bleached bones against a thick grey sky. This is Renaissance Rise, one of several new housing estates being built in and around Mernda. Nearby are Woodland Waters (alliteration is big in real estate) and Mernda Villages. A woman who had driven down from Bright to sell chestnuts from a van told me that the muddy patch of land where the market is held had also been sold to developers. Traders had been warned, she said, that they will have to move on when work begins on the site.

Mernda is about an hour’s drive from central Melbourne, north up the Plenty Valley. It is in one of the urban growth corridors extending out from the city like the fingers of a splayed hand. Soon after we passed La Trobe University and RMIT’s Bundoora campus, evidence of land sales and subdivisions appeared on the roadside in the form of banners, bunting and billboards. ‘More Nature’ promised one advertisement for Renaissance Rise. ‘More Open Space’ pledged the next. To
underline the attractions of Mernda, both billboards were fringed at the base with
tall, luxuriant fronds of fake green grass. Irony is not a characteristic of real estate
promotion, but I had to wonder if a tongue was firmly in a cheek when the
copywriter came up with the line on the next billboard: ‘Kiss the urban sprawl
goodbye.’

The new subdivisions deliver the opposite of a rural lifestyle. Messy paddocks
have been converted into regulation-size plots. Tangled fences have given way to
precise kerbing and Astroturf nature strips. The border markers of the estates are
not rusty wire gates but monumental stone walls framing the entrance road.

When I visited the display homes at Mernda Villages, I was acutely aware that
Mernda will be anything but a village once all the sites are sold, the houses built and
the homes occupied. The double-storey luxury-model residence had four bedrooms,
three with ensuite bathrooms and walk-in robes of generous proportions. The
kitchen presented acres of granite bench tops and dazzled with gleaming
appliances; there was a breakfast bar and a formal dining area, four separate lounge
rooms (‘living’, ‘family’, ‘leisure’ and ‘rumpus’), a study and a covered deck built
around the shrine of an industrial-scale hooded barbeque. ‘Five-star resort living in a
home that is pleasantly affordable and great for growing families,’ burbled a young
man’s voice piped through every room. Construction costs on the two-storey model
start at $286,500. Throw in another $220,000 for land and your dream home can be
built to order in eighteen weeks for less than half a million dollars.

Construction starts at $196,000 for the more modest, single-storey residence,
which still boasts multiple living areas, a master bedroom with ensuite and walk-in
robe and double garage as standard. The building extends to the very edge of the
block. There was a narrow strip of lawn and a palm-fringed garden bed in the
display, but I could not help wondering where I would hang out the washing.
Mernda Villages may promise ‘life surrounded by nature’, with ‘sustainably
planned’ conservation zones, rain gardens and spacious parklands full of native
trees and flora, but the future residents of Mernda Villages won’t be going to the
Monday market to purchase young layers for a backyard chook shed.

It is easy to be snide. Having entered the property market twenty years ago, my
wife and I now live comfortably in a suburb within easy bike-riding distance of the
city centre. There is not enough room for chooks, but we have space to hang out the
washing and to grow basil and tomatoes in summer, broad beans in winter. We are
well served by public transport (bus, tram and train) and it’s a short walk to parks,
schools, shopping and good coffee. While not as spacious as the homes on display
on Mernda, our house would once have accommodated a bigger tribe than our one-
child family, and it has almost tripled in value since we bought it ten years ago. On
paper we might be millionaires, but if we were trying to buy in the same suburb
today we would be lucky to secure a one-bedroom apartment with parking for the
same price as the most luxurious two-storey house and land package we looked at in Mernda. As we toured the display homes I asked myself where we would end up living if we were trying to buy our first home in the current market.

A friendly salesman extolled the virtues of country life – though he admitted to living further west, in Sunbury, along another of Melbourne’s stretching suburban fingers. ‘It’s much safer than the inner-city,’ he said. ‘There is no crime, no theft, no need to lock your door.’ (I refrained from asking him why all the display homes were equipped with burglar alarms.) The people moving to Mernda are not just young families and first home-buyers, he explained, but also empty-nesters cashing in the family home to move to something smaller, or seeking new pastures because established suburbs closer to the city, like Greensborough, are ‘getting a bit too built-up’. Marketing brochures promise that Mernda will soon have its own Village Centre with local shopping, making it ‘ideal for those seeking a convenient lifestyle without compromise’. A new Catholic primary school has been built, a state school and a childcare centre are under construction, and there is a secondary college just a few minutes’ drive away.

There is no mention of public transport, though Mernda is included on two privately run bus routes. I asked my wife to drop me at the bus stop back near the Bridge Inn Hotel. Unfortunately I had just missed the 12.32 pm to Greensborough. The next service was at 1.13. As I sat at the shelter in front a billboard promising ‘elevated land with stunning views’, there was a steady rumble of trucks carrying construction materials and equipment to the new subdivisions. A lone council worker in a fluoro-orange jacket used tongs to collect butts from the grassy verges of Plenty Road.

Eventually a young man in a black T-shirt joined me at the stop. He had just moved out from Greensborough, after buying land and building a house, and he was commuting to the city for only the second time. He hadn’t actually bought in Mernda, as planned, but a few kilometres east, towards Doreen. ‘What I didn’t realise is that we’ve ended up exactly halfway between two bus stops,’ he said. ‘It’s a fifteen-minute walk to the nearest stop, either way.’ When I asked him why he bought there, he looked at me like I was a bit simple. ‘It’s cheap,’ he replied. ‘We’re on a budget, mate.’ He buried his head in some lecture notes.

The Dyson’s bus arrived ten minutes late and carried us towards the city. The key stops are at shopping centres ringed by car parks: University Hill, Axis Homemaker Centre, Rivergum Village. After a half-hour journey we were deposited at Greensborough Station, just in time to miss the 1.48 to Flinders Street. There was a fifteen-minute wait until the next train. As it pulled out of the station I stared through scratched glass at the leafy, undulating suburb, looking into sloping backyards, with lawns, shrubs, vegetable gardens, even the odd chook shed. I contemplated whether a move from Greensborough to Mernda might mean less open space, not more.
I arrived at Flinders Street about two hours after being dropped off at the bus stop. My wife made the trip by car in less than half the time. No wonder there were hardly any passengers on the bus.

The developments at Mernda are the latest chapter in the Australian story of searching for home. In Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*, Stan Parker’s ‘melancholy longing for permanence’ leads him to settle on a bush block, cutting and digging until the ‘clearing encroached more and more on the trees, and the stumps of the felled trees had begun to disappear, in ash and smoke, or rotted away like old teeth’. By the end of the novel Stan’s farm has been enveloped by suburbia. The old man and his wife, Amy, have gradually sold off their land for housing and he now sits in the circle of their neglected garden, beyond which are other circles, ‘whether crescent of purple villas or the bare patches of earth, on which rabbits sat and observed some abstract spectacle for minutes on end, in a paddock not yet built upon’.

White’s book was published in 1956. Almost half a century later, in 2001, Steven Carroll picked up the story of 1950s urban encroachment in *The Art of the Engine Driver* (HarperCollins), the first of his Glenroy trilogy of novels inspired in part by his own postwar childhood, lived at what was then Melbourne’s outer edge: ‘The suburb is new, built around an old farming township. The bluestone farmhouses still control the few vantage points of the low, broad valley on which the community sits, but the new lines of the suburb are taking shape. Streets and salubriously named dirt avenues have been carved out of the paddocks and houses have begun to appear; red roofs, white weatherboards and instant gardens, sprouting like fold-out models. Cattle refuse to accept the newly drawn suburban boundaries and graze where they always have, even if it is now somebody’s front yard, and even if it means a diet of yellow roses instead of clover.’

This is also my story. I am the child of English migrants who moved from Adelaide’s northern plains in the early 1960s to build a house on a steep block carved out between stringy barks on the slopes of Mount Lofty. We would awake to the trilling of magpies or the cackle of kookaburras; rosellas flashed past our windows, or chewed on their cedar frames. In autumn and winter the bush would drip with fog, in spring the track to school would burst into clouds of butterflies, and amid the blooms of wattle and native heath and the pea bush that we called egg-and-bacon we would sometimes discover delicate donkey orchids or the much rarer spider orchids, flowering fragile in the undergrowth. In summer my brother and I would catch sleepy lizards and blue-tongues and bearded dragons, feed them mashed banana and carefully take the ticks from their ears with tweezers, before returning them to the wild in the same place we found them, just like the naturalists we saw on TV. In the evening we often enjoyed a glorious vista of coloured sky from our dead-end street as the sun set over the flat pan of the city. ‘Red at night, Shepherd’s delight,’ we’d say, as Adelaide’s lights began to twinkle and St Vincent’s Gulf disappeared into a dark smudge.
Over time the city escaped from the plains and crept up the hills to join us. At the bottom of our gully I would clamber over mounds of earth and through huge concrete pipes that piled up as the new freeway went through. We would hear the hum and grind of machinery during the day. At weekends we would sit, pretending to drive, in the cockpits of silent bulldozers. The work stretched over years and progress seemed so slow that we used to joke at primary school about getting a job with ‘the highways’ so you could get paid to lean on a shovel. In retrospect, I realise that I was witnessing rapid and monumental change – that time was playing its usual trick as captured by White and Carroll in their novels, moving simultaneously slow and fast, in small increments and by sudden leaps and bounds.

New houses emerged, until for us too ‘the clearing encroached more and more on the trees’. Eventually, together with our new neighbours, we were less surrounded by bush than surrounding it. In my last year of primary school our family moved further out to a stone cottage on a road of ‘loose barbed wire and dusty trees’. It sat on twenty acres of fertile land in a rural district brought within commuting range of the city by the very freeway that I had watched being built from our eyrie on Mount Lofty. From then on we grew most of our vegetables, all our eggs and much of our fruit and meat, and my parents shared the excess with colleagues in the city. But what had once been a working dairy was now essentially a hobby farm. In the years we lived there, and in the years since, many more of the commercial farms and orchards that once surrounded us have given way to residential housing. ‘Land’ became ‘real estate’: more profitable but less productive.

How does this Australian story end? Does it end? In Mernda and communities like it on the fringe of every capital city, there is no evidence of a final chapter – just a relentless drive for further development.

The population of the City of Whittlesea, which contains Mernda, grew by almost 5 per cent last financial year, as 6,500 people moved into the area. The growth rate in other parts of Melbourne is even higher. To the south-west, Wyndham, which takes in Julia Gillard’s political stomping ground of Werribee, grew by more than 8 per cent; Melton, where development spreads along the Western Highway in the direction of Adelaide, grew by almost 8 per cent. Together with Wanneroo, Swan and Rockingham in Perth, and Ipswich in Brisbane, these are Australia’s fastest growing municipalities. Melbourne is Australia’s fastest growing city. Its population passed four million in July 2009 and is growing at almost a hundred thousand people a year. If this continues it will overtake Sydney as Australia’s largest city in a few decades. Despite state government efforts to encourage urban consolidation, and despite increasing densities in the CBD and the inner city, 60 per cent of Melbourne’s population growth occurs at least twenty kilometres from the city centre. Premier John Brumby says that when similar growth occurred in the past, Victoria ‘emerged a more productive, sustainable and
liveable state because of it – like when Melbourne’s population doubled in the postwar boom’. Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan faces the future with equal confidence. ‘The answer isn’t to stop growing; it’s to grow differently,’ he said.

Given the record of state and federal governments to date, such answers are far from reassuring. Melbourne appears to have handled its growth better than Sydney, thanks in part to better administration, in part to a more forgiving geography and most of all to having had better core infrastructure upon which to build. (Praise the survival of Melbourne’s trams.) Labor Premiers Steve Bracks and John Brumby have upgraded rail links to centres like Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat, improving the prospects for regional development and inter-city commuting, but the extension of train lines within the greater metropolitan area has been neglected for decades by governments of both stripes. Promised rail links – to the airport, to Doncaster, to Rowville serving Monash University – have never been built.

In *Screw Light Bulbs* (UWA Press, 2010), Donna Green and Liz Minchin discuss Aurora, the largest energy-efficient residential development in Australia. Built by the state-government-owned developer VicUrban, Aurora’s six- and seven-star-rated houses require minimal heating and cooling, and all toilets and garden taps use recycled water. But Aurora’s ‘most exciting sustainability feature’ was to be a new train line and dedicated station: ‘Mimicking the design of an inner suburb, higher-density terrace homes were planned to be built close to the station, while bigger, more spread-out homes were located slightly further away…the new train station would be within about 800 metres of most homes.’

Around twenty-five thousand people will eventually settle in Aurora, but the promised train station has ‘vanished off the map’ and ‘the only public transport on offer is a bus that runs just every forty minutes during the week, with even less frequent services on weekends.’ As the authors note, VicUrban is not to blame. The state government invested its transport budget in several new roads and a freeway upgrade, even though the train line was ranked as a higher priority. It is as if Labor believes there is no political gain in building train lines – yet the problems in Melbourne’s overloaded public transport system are one of the principal reasons for voter dissatisfaction with government.

More than $1.3 billion has been committed to an automated ticketing system, Myki, which is three years behind schedule and shows little sign of ever working as promised. In the meantime the quality of public transport services has declined markedly, partly because the Victorian Government was caught unprepared by a boom in use. The number of trips per year on all forms of public transport grew from 350 million in 2004 to 490 million in 2009. Passenger numbers on trains grew by more than 10 per cent per annum for three consecutive years: in 2004, there were 137 million train boardings; by 2009 there were 214 million. Existing services are now chronically overcrowded; most rolling stock is old and dirty; brakes fail and air...
conditioners conk out when the temperature exceeds 35 degrees. Even with thirty-eight new trains being introduced to the network (many of them before the November state election) it is difficult to see things improving.

Melbourne – like other capital cities – continues to rely on a backbone of public transport infrastructure installed in the pre-car era. As the engineer and rail enthusiast Louis Fouvy has noted, between 1854 and 1929 more than 750 kilometres of track were added to Melbourne’s rail system for every increase of one million in the city’s population. If this rate of expansion had continued, Melbourne would have 2,500 kilometres of rail line instead of the sub-500 kilometres that it has today. The last major extension of the metropolitan rail network was the Glen Waverley line, completed in 1930. The Brumby Government has promised major investment to upgrade the network and push rail lines out to new suburbs as part of its $14.1-billion Victorian Transport Plan. This would take the rail line closer, though not all the way, to Mernda. But as Sydneysiders know only too well, ambitious transport blueprints are easier to conceive than to deliver.

As Paul Mees argues convincingly in Transport for Suburbia (Earthscan, 2010), public transport can be fixed – or at least massively improved – without big spending. The problems are political and administrative, not technological or financial. Europe and Canada have shown that it’s not impossible to service urban sprawl with efficient transport links. ‘Density is not destiny,’ Mees writes, and we don’t have to remake the ‘burbs in the mould of the inner city to escape from ‘autotopia’. A centrally planned, well co-ordinated system linking buses with trains and trams could create a spider-web network making it easy to go ‘anywhere, anytime’, because changing from one mode or route to another would be as simple as turning left or right in your car. Buses would link across the tram and train routes that radiate out from the city, allowing people to visit a neighbouring suburb without heroic acts of self-sacrifice. Buses would also feed the train system, with arrival and departure times co-ordinated for maximum convenience. This would bring more passengers to already crowded trains, but it would also be possible to increase the frequency of services on existing tracks. According to Donna Green and Liz Minchin, there were more peak hour trains arriving at Flinders Street in the 1960s than there were in 2008. But there were fewer cars on our streets then, too. Today more trains, more often would mean more boom gates lowered, more traffic jams and more angry driver-voters. The government could solve this problem by investing billions of dollars in upgrading level crossings to separate rail from road – which is unlikely. Or it could follow Paul Mees’ advice and declare unambiguously that public transport has priority over private transport – even more unlikely, given its record to date on difficult political decisions.

In 2002 the Victorian Government released an overarching urban strategy, ‘Melbourne 2030’, designed to push the city upwards instead of outwards: to create, in Premier Steve Bracks’ words, a ‘more compact and sustainable city’. The plan
defined an urban-growth boundary around the city and carved out twelve green wedges to be permanently protected from future development and preserved instead as park or farmland. Simultaneously, it encouraged TODs – transport-oriented developments – around hubs like railway stations. The idea, Bracks said, was to shift ‘from a city-centric “hub and spoke” development’ to a ‘network of cities, towns and regions that relate to, and depend on, each other’. Despite the neat logic of the scheme, and its enthusiastic endorsement by leading urban planners, critics beset the government from all sides. The housing industry decried the lack of new green-field land releases and warned ominously of escalating prices for first-home buyers. Farmers whose land had been zoned for protection were furious that they would never reap the rich harvest of subdivision enjoyed by counterparts a few kilometres away in the growth corridor. Gentrified inner-suburbanites, led by part-time Melburnians like Geoffrey Rush and Barry Humphries, vociferously opposed ‘over-development’ at heritage sites such as Camberwell Railway Station. Before long the government caved in and ‘Melbourne 2030’ was replaced by a new plan, ‘Melbourne @ 5 Million’ (the city’s anticipated population in 2030). While couched in the same aspirational language of creating ‘a multi-centre city’, the new plan loosened the belt around Melbourne’s expanding middle. The ‘Outer Melbourne Urban Growth Boundary’ that had been drawn tight to stop the suburban spread was let out to ‘accommodate some of the 284,000 new dwellings expected to be built in the growth areas’.

As cities sprawl, infrastructure sags and politics stymies creative approaches to planning, public support is growing for a strategy that appears much easier to implement: rein in population growth. The thinking is appealing. Reducing the number of new residents will ease the pressure on transport, land, water and the environment. Fewer new people means less need for new housing on the suburban fringe. According to the rudimentary laws of supply and demand, this should also bring down prices and make housing more affordable. Such simple calculations fail to account for the effects of inflationary policies like negative gearing, a low capital gains tax, the privileged tax treatment of the family home and speculative land-banking by developers. But such complexities fade into the background against the allure of a simple population-based approach to our problems.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ population clock (22, 357,415 in May, and counting) says Australia’s total population increases by one person every 70 seconds, due to the interaction of three factors: one birth every 1 minute and 46 seconds, one death every 3 minutes and 42 seconds, and a net gain of one international migrant every 1 minute and 46 seconds. This equates to a population growth rate of 2.1 per cent per year – much higher than that in either India (1.4 per cent) or Indonesia (1.2 per cent). Every year more than 450,000 people – almost the population of Tasmania – are added to Australia’s population.
Compared with other developed nations Australians are enthusiastic breeders, and this accounts for about a third of the country’s population growth. In 2008 Australia’s total fertility rate – the number of babies per woman – was 1.97. This is the highest recorded rate since 1977, and puts Australia ahead of some middle-income countries in the developing world like Brazil (1.83 babies per woman), Thailand (1.82) and Iran (1.78); substantially ahead of European nations like Spain (1.47), Greece (1.39), Italy (1.39) and Germany (1.3); and way ahead of rich Asian nations like Japan (1.26), Singapore (1.26) and Korea (1.22). Maternity wards have been caught unprepared by this baby boom, which is attributed largely to the cyclical impact of thirty-something women and their partners reacting to the ticking of biological clocks. According to the Productivity Commission, the surge in births is made up mostly of ‘postponed babies’, and is not the result of Peter Costello’s ‘one for the country’ baby bonus of $3,000 (increased to $5,000 by an even more generous Wayne Swan). The commission reckons that the small number of additional tots delivered as a result of government incentives were very expensive babies indeed, having cost the Commonwealth budget about $300,000 each.

In the long term, a fertility rate of 1.97 per cent would not, on its own, be enough to increase Australia’s population, were it not that, in the short term, we have got much better at postponing death. But no one lives forever, so barring an unlikely further sharp jump in fertility, natural growth alone would eventually lead to a stable or gently falling population.

This is why the population debate focuses on immigration, which accounts for the other two-thirds of Australia’s population growth. While there is no immediate, simple or direct relationship between reproductive choices and the introduction or removal of baby bonuses (or paid maternity leave, family allowances or tax breaks), the causal link between government-controlled migration levels and population increase appears obvious. The federal government need only pull the right policy lever and migration, and population growth, will slow.

The most articulate call for Labor to pull this lever comes from its own backbench. Kelvin Thomson has held Bob Hawke’s old seat of Wills in Melbourne’s northern suburbs since 1996, and spent six years in state parliament before that. Previously in shadow cabinet and aspiring to the job of Commonwealth Attorney-General, Thomson has been damaged goods since it emerged that he once signed a character reference for a constituent, Tony Mokbel. (This was before Mokbel became a notorious underworld figure, but after he had already been convicted of various criminal offences.) So when Thomson emerged as the outspoken champion of zero population growth in 2009, my initial response was journalistic cynicism. I wondered if he had been targeted for a preselection challenge and was opportunistically shoring up his local profile in case he needed to fight to hold his seat as an independent. (Phil Cleary, an author and well-known local figure, held Wills as an independent after Bob Hawke’s retirement from politics in 1992.)
A senior official in the Immigration Department had a different theory: he suggested to me that Kelvin Thomson had been instructed to fly a kite, to draw the political lightning out of the gathering population thunderclouds. But after talking at length to Thomson I came away convinced by his sincerity and thoughtfulness, even if I wasn’t completely won over by his arguments.

I caught the train to Coburg to visit Thomson – an imposing figure with his high domed forehead and rich, deep voice. As I walked from the station to his electorate office it struck me as incongruous that a politician representing this area would lead the push to slash immigration. On Sydney Road, Yianni’s Pantheon Cakes sits alongside the Dat Thanh Bakery. Khaled’s kids clothing store is next to Trinh’s children’s wear. Outside a Lebanese grocery a three-piece band in lairy yellow vests played trad jazz on trombone, sax and banjo. It was school holidays and the Victoria Street mall was crowded with young and old, sitting, playing, chatting, eating, drinking coffee. The air was a jumble of aromas, a mix of languages and accents as diverse as you’ll find in Australia.

Thomson’s electorate looks like an advertisement for the benefits of immigration. But as the MP points out, his population crusade is fuelled by local concerns. There are five major residential development projects being debated and disputed in Coburg, including plans for the old Pentridge Prison, the former Kodak factory site and a disused tram depot. Some projects have been ‘called in’ by State Planning Minister Justin Madden, meaning that locals no longer get much say in what will happen. The developments will bring thousands more families to Coburg, yet the suburb does not have a single state high school. In a region with twenty-two primary schools – stretching from Pascoe Vale South across Coburg to West Preston – there is not a single government secondary college. Locals call it the Coburg education ‘black hole’.

Ironically, the old Coburg High School is itself the subject of a development proposal – Justin Madden has just approved a plan to build 510 apartments there – and the grounds of the old Newlands High School are now part of the Pentridge Prison redevelopment. Some of these new dwellings will be low-cost housing provided under the National Rental Affordability Scheme: urban consolidation in action. But many locals feel they have been steamrolled. Kelvin Thomson is speaking up as their elected representative. In planning, ‘people don’t get choices, they get stooged,’ he said. ‘We’re not getting a choice between urban sprawl and high-rise infill – we’re getting both.’

Thomson pointed out that others in Labor share his concerns – in the past Bob Carr, Barry Jones and Barry Cohen have all voiced similar views – and told me that he receives private support from many other party colleagues, and from Liberal and Green rivals. The Rudd Government’s most trusted bureaucrat, Treasury Secretary Dr Ken Henry, also shares his worries. Contemplating a 60 per cent increase in
Australia’s population by 2050, Henry has wondered where the extra thirteen million people would live. In one speech he imagined Sydney and Melbourne both growing into cities of almost seven million and Brisbane doubling in size, to four million.

‘How will Sydney cope with a 54 per cent increase in its population, Melbourne a 74 per cent increase and Brisbane a 106 per cent increase?’ Henry asked. ‘Surely not by continuing to expand their geographic footprints at the same rate as in the past several decades. Surely not by loading more cars and trucks onto road networks that can’t cope with today’s traffic.’

Infrastructure Australia’s 2010 State of the Cities report found that car dependency in urban areas had grown faster than population, at a massive social and economic price. The report estimated that in 2005 capital city congestion generated an ‘avoidable cost’ of around $9.4 billion, and it projected that without action the cost could rise to $20.4 billion by 2020.

Henry’s concerns are not just economics and lifestyle, but the broader environmental implications of population growth. Echoing the disquiet voiced by Barry Jones in 1994, when he chaired a parliamentary inquiry into Australia’s Population Carrying Capacity, Henry questions whether Australia’s natural resources are capable of sustaining many more people. Water is central to his concerns – as it was to the Jones report – and it is easy to see why. In response to years of drought, the Victorian government encouraged citizens to cut household water use to 155 litres per person per day. The target was achieved with considerable personal effort and much bucketing of bathwater onto gardens. Yet if Melbourne’s population is to double to eight million people, then individual water use will have to come down to less than eighty litres per day. That is unless we commit to building more energy-hungry desalination plants or to recycling waste water for human consumption – a logical but politically unpalatable measure that so far only the Queensland state government has been willing to contemplate after dams in the south-east corner of the state came perilously close to drying up. Henry, famed for his love of wombats, also fears an even greater loss of biodiversity – ‘difficult as that might be to imagine, given our history of species extermination’.

The Treasury Secretary is pessimistic about most aspects of the future: ‘Our record has been poor and in my view we are not well placed to deal effectively with the environmental challenges posed by a population of thirty-five million.’

Kelvin Thomson has the same worries: urban amenity, water supply, species extinction. This is not surprising, as he shares Ken Henry’s passion for Australian wildlife. In his public pronouncements, Thomson rarely misses an opportunity to point out that more than two hundred of Australia’s 760 recognised bird species are listed as threatened. In fact, it was birds that got Kelvin Thomson into politics. Born in 1955, he had a childhood roughly contemporaneous with that of Michael, Steve
Carroll’s alter ego in *The Art of the Engine Driver*, and grew up in Pascoe Vale, one ring in from Glenroy, the suburb in which the novel is set. Thomson describes his boyhood as ‘free range’. He remembers riding his bike to Hadfield – next door to Glenroy and now ‘all schools and housing’ – to puddle about in swamps looking for frogs. Thomson’s father hailed from Victoria’s Western District and took his boy camping in the places he knew as a child, encouraging his son’s interest in native plants and animals. When Thomson was about ten, there was a memorable four-week caravan trip through Queensland. Equipped with a pair of binoculars and a bird book, the young Kelvin became an amateur ornithologist, an interest he still maintains.

In the early 1970s, Thomson’s father was actively involved in two major conservation battles in Western Victoria, in which an emerging environment movement squared off against Victoria’s longest serving Premier, Sir Henry Bolte, eventually securing the protection of two remarkable landscapes – the Lower Glenelg River and the Little Desert – as national parks. The teenage Kelvin followed the tussle closely and became involved on the edges, heavily influenced by books like Rachel Carson’s classic work *Silent Spring* (1962) and Vincent Serventy’s *A Continent in Danger* (1966). A distinguished naturalist and wildlife photographer, the late Serventy hosted *Nature Walkabout*, the first natural history program on Australian TV, and is often described as the father of Australia’s environmental movement. When *A Continent in Danger* was first published, *The Age* said of Serventy: he ‘describes Australia’s unique and beautiful flora and fauna with infectious enthusiasm but also warns that indiscriminate slaughter has already exterminated some species and threatens many more’.

When the battles in western Victoria were won and the more liberal Rupert (Dick) Hamer replaced Bolte as Premier, Kelvin Thomson felt the tide had turned. Hamer established the Land Conservation Council to consider areas for permanent protection from development, and the Environmental Protection Authority to police environmental laws. He also cancelled the contentious inner-city freeway program that would have ripped through suburbs like Carlton, concerned that Melbourne was becoming ‘a place for the motor car to move rather than for people to live’. It was as if we had collectively seen the error of our ways, Thomson thought. Vigilance would still be required but the extraordinary value and fragility of the natural world had been granted political recognition and enshrined in law. The target of setting aside 5 per cent of Australia’s landmass as national parks was achieved and exceeded. ‘I had a rosy view,’ Thomson told me, ‘but our gains have proved inadequate.’

From the start, Kelvin Thomson had a nagging concern about the link between population growth and environmental destruction, but he had been reassured by the predictions of demographers and politicians that Australia’s population would level out. In 1999, the former Coalition Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock
was ‘reasonably certain’ that Australia’s ‘population growth rate over the next fifty years’ was likely to be ‘significantly slower than that of the last fifty years’. Subject to changes in the fertility rate, he said, maintaining net overseas migration levels of between 60,000 and 100,000 ‘could lead to Australia’s population stabilising at between twenty-four and twenty-six million’. As recently as 2001, Ruddock was looking forward ‘to Australia achieving a stable population of around 24 million by mid-century’ (the ABS prediction at the time) and he saw the main risk as undershooting, rather than overshooting. Australia’s fertility rate had been ‘falling steadily for three decades’, Ruddock said, and there were ‘some signs’ that it would continue to do so. He warned that ‘there are no examples of a nation successfully raising its fertility rate once it has fallen to the levels we see today in Italy, Spain and Japan.’ Nor could Australia be assured that migration would be enough to counter this trend. He noted that the world had a ‘finite supply’ of ‘skilled, educated, English-speaking migrants’ and that demand for these migrations would be ‘driven by profound and sustained demographic pressures that will cut into the labour forces of many developed nations and force them to seek out new recruits from overseas’. Australia could not be sure of winning the migrants it needed in a competitive international marketplace and hence ‘lower net overseas migration may be a structural rather than a cyclical phenomenon’.

So far he has been proved wrong on both counts. The fertility rate is up, and Australia remains a hugely attractive destination for skilled migrants. While Ruddock was making his predictions, he and Prime Minister John Howard were busy developing policies that would transform the migration system, and make it much harder for subsequent governments to simply pull the migration lever and slow population growth.

Since the end of the White Australia policy, political and media attention on immigration has focused on the annual quotas set by the federal government. These numbers have gone up or down in line with the nation’s economic fortunes – rising in the good times (Menzies, Fraser, Hawke and Howard) and falling in the bad (Whitlam and Keating). But migration numbers are no longer determined by a centralised program through which the government can tweak its targets up or down. Soon after the global financial crisis hit, Immigration Minister Chris Evans cut Australia’s permanent skilled migration intake for 2008-09 by 14 per cent, from 133,500 to 115,000 places, with a further reduction to 108,100 places in 2009–10. But this will not necessarily make much difference to the number of people moving to Australia.

The level of net overseas migration (long-term arrivals minus long-term departures) hit a record of 297,400 people in the year to 30 September 2009, and will probably be revised even higher – to around 340,000 – once the ABS publishes its final estimate. The sharp jump on earlier periods was exaggerated by a new method of accounting introduced in 2006, in which the ABS counts not just permanent
settlers but also long-term arrivals like international students and temporary migrant workers on 457 visas. This, though, is indicative of the fundamental shift in migration policy that has taken place over the past decade and a half, a shift possibly as profound as the end of the White Australia policy, and with far greater long-term implications – though far less discussed – than the continued arrival of asylum seekers in boats from Indonesia.

Between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2008, for the first time the number of foreign workers coming to Australia on temporary skilled 457 visas outstripped the number arriving as permanent skilled migrants. Yet only a few years earlier, in late 2005, Prime Minister John Howard rebuffed calls for a temporary seasonal labour program for Pacific Islanders: ‘We always have a preference for permanent settlement for migration… I think you either invite someone to come to your country to stay as a permanent citizen or you don’t.’ While overlooking the ignominious colonial history of blackbirding in the Queensland cane fields, the former Prime Minister’s comments accurately identified the bias towards permanent migration that distinguished Australian policy from European-style gastarbeiter programs for much of the postwar period. In 2005 Howard’s comments were out of date. In 2010 they sound ridiculous.

According to the ANU demographer Peter McDonald, there were 1,440,000 people living in Australia on ‘a long-term temporary basis’ in 2009. Since most of these temporary migrants have work rights, foreign workers now account for around a tenth of our national labour force. The largest group (about 580,000) is made up of overseas students – those studying (who can work up to twenty hours per week) and graduates remaining in Australian on temporary visas (who can work full-time). The next-biggest group are New Zealanders (550,000), who Australians may think of as almost-citizens but who do not automatically qualify for permanent residence or enjoy equivalent access to welfare and services. For example, in some circumstances their children will be required to pay full fees if they wish to study at Australian universities. Then there are more than 140,000 temporary skilled migrants on 457 visas and tens of thousands of eighteen-to-thirty-year-old ‘travellers’, whose twelve-month working holiday-maker visas can be extended for a second year if they work in certain industries in regional areas. Almost 190,000 working holiday visas were issued in 2008–09: more than one in ten of those were for a second twelve-month stay.

The number of visas issued to students, 457 temporary workers and working holiday-makers grew significantly for more than a decade, from 1996 until the onset of the global financial crisis. The holiday-maker category continued to grow even after the crisis hit. Perhaps the severity of the downturn in the northern hemisphere made a working ‘holiday’ in Australia more desirable than unemployment at home. The working holiday reciprocal scheme was originally intended to be ‘experiential’, allowing young travellers to ‘supplement’ their funds through ‘incidental
employment, and to experience closer contact with a local community’, but
tinkering by successive Coalition and Labor governments has given the scheme a
second life as a labour market program designed to meet the seasonal needs of
regional employers in industries like agriculture and tourism. There is a risk that
brokers could identify the working holiday scheme as a window through which
they can organise gangs of temporary workers to come to Australia. Indeed there is
some anecdotal evidence that this may already be happening – observers note the
sharp increase in working holiday-makers from South Korea, which now accounts
for one in five visa holders and matches the UK as the largest single source country.

I am not convinced that temporary migration has peaked. Although the federal
government has belatedly moved to clean up the rorts in international education,
and to weaken the link between study and a permanent visa, most universities and
TAFEs are still looking to ‘grow the market’, not least because this is about the only
way in which they can increase their income. There is no sign of declining interest in
the working holiday-maker scheme, and the government is still expanding the
scheme or schemes like it to new countries. There is every likelihood that temporary
skilled migration under the 457 program could once again overtake permanent
skilled migration as growth returns to the economy. Already employers are
warning of looming labour shortages, and business is likely to bring in temporary
workers far more swiftly than the government lifts its annual quota for permanent
migrants. While the permanent skilled intake is capped, temporary migration
schemes are not.

The growth of temporary migration is a symptom of an even more profound
shift in Australia’s migration program – from government planning, control
and target-setting to a flexible system in which numbers fluctuate according to
employer demand. In effect, the federal government is surrendering to business a
measure of control over migration flow.

This is implicit in the language that accompanied the changes to skilled migration
introduced by Senator Evans in February this year: he talked about shifting from a
‘supply-driven’ to a ‘demand-driven’ program. In other words, Labor is building a
system in which – rather than migrants putting up their hands to become residents
of Australia – employers, including state and territory governments, select and
sponsor the migrants that they think they will need. This is a significant refinement
of the bias towards skilled migration that has characterised Australian policy since
the late 1980s.

Chris Evans says the old system, under which migrants were processed in turn,
in the order in which they submitted their applications, was like customers queuing
up after ‘pulling a ticket number from the dispenser at the supermarket deli
counter’. In future migrants will swim around like fish in a pool, and the

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government will allow employers to pluck out the fattest – those deemed best suited to meeting the needs of the Australian economy. ‘What do employers do when they recruit?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘What do universities do when admitting students? They work out ways of selecting the best from those putting themselves forward.’

There are strong arguments in favour of such a change. As Senator Evans said, ‘it didn’t make any sense’ that Australia was ‘taking hairdressers from overseas in front of doctors and nurses’. And yet, when administrative machines are fashioned on a calculation of national self-interest, individuals can often get trapped in the cogs. This is not just a question of absolute numbers. Also at stake are the terms on which we invite migrants to live in this country. Peter McDonald’s view that temporary migration will have only a temporary effect on population growth assumes that temporary migrants will go home again – an expectation, reflected in government policy, that they will simply up sticks and leave when no longer wanted.

Another of the structural changes underway is the shift towards a ‘two-step’ migration program, in which permanent settlement is preceded by a period of temporary residence as a migrant worker or an international student. Holders of 457 visas and overseas students graduating from Australian tertiary institutions already account for around 40 per cent of the permanent visas granted in the skilled migration scheme, and the proportion is likely to increase. This ‘try before you buy’ system of migration can have advantages for both the migrant and the receiving country, but it has a potential downside. If temporary migration outstrips permanent migration, there may be a mismatch between the settlement places available and the number of aspiring residents who will have already invested significantly – financially and emotionally – in a life in Australia.

In fact, this has already happened. In 2008–09, 170,000 people applied for permanent migration to Australia but the annual intake was only 108,000. The backlog of applications awaiting processing grew to 145,000. Around half of these applications were lodged onshore by international students who had graduated from Australian courses. Some 12,000 are cooks; an even larger number of accountants are on the list and hairdressers also feature prominently. All of these applicants had amassed the magical 120 points necessary to qualify for permanent migration under the old migration points test. But because there were too few places on offer in the migration program, the government categorised certain classes of application as low-priority, effectively putting them on indefinite hold. The people in this category have been advised that there will be no decision on their application until at least the end of 2011. They can continue to live and work in Australia while waiting in the queue, but without sponsorship by an employer they are unlikely to move towards the front.
The changes to skilled migration announced by the minister in February 2010 may stop the queue from growing, as it is clear that training in hairdressing or cookery will no longer lead to a permanent visa. But this is cold comfort to those already in line, who invested in an Australian education with the reasonable expectation that their final qualification would lead to residency. This was the system constructed under the Howard government to fill skills shortages and make Australian education more attractive in the international marketplace. Students responded rationally. Now they wait indefinitely, having paid tens of thousands of dollars in course fees and thousands more in non-refundable visa-processing charges, professional migration advice, health checks, skills recognition and document verification.

Xiru Li has lived in Australia since he was seventeen. He completed Year 11 and 12 at high school in Sydney, then attended a bridging college for a year before studying business administration at Macquarie University. In 2008, after completing a Masters in Business Law at the University of Sydney, he applied for permanent residency. He was told that the normal processing time would be between seven and nine months. After the rule change, Immigration Department officials could give him no indication of when his case might be looked at, beyond the general advice that a decision is unlikely before the end of 2011. Li estimates that his family has spent at least $300,000 on his education and living costs in Australia. Two years after submitting his application for permanent residency, Li is still waiting for an outcome and working casual shifts in a bar at the Sydney Opera House. ‘It’s impossible to get a full-time job in line with my qualifications while I am on a bridging visa,’ he told me. This is the nub of the temporary migration issue: temporary migrants are vulnerable in the workplace because of their visa status, whether they are 457 visa holders, international students or student graduates. This vulnerability is not shared equally – a physician from Phoenix may feel more able to stand up to a boss than a welder from Wuhan – but what most have in common is the need to get their employer’s endorsement to settle in Australia. This has created a much larger pool of temporary migrant labour in which unscrupulous employers can fish for exploitable staff.

Temporary entry is now a permanent feature of our national economy. Universities rely on the fees of international students and business depends on their labour, and on the labour of 457 visa holders and working backpackers. A sharp reduction in temporary migration would involve considerable economic upheaval.

Peter McDonald is confident that temporary migration to Australia cannot continue to grow as rapidly as it has in recent years. Once numbers stabilise, he predicts, net overseas migration will settle at about 180,000 a year, taking Australia’s population towards the 2009 Intergenerational Report projection of thirty-six million by
2050. But, like Kelvin Thomson, I am no longer convinced by such prognoses. The previous Intergen report, prepared two years earlier, had Australia’s population reaching around twenty-nine million by mid-century. The first report, published as part of the budget papers in 2002, anticipated a population in 2042 of just 25.3 million.

Since his appointment as Australia’s first Population Minister, Tony Burke has repeatedly said that the 2009 Intergen figure of thirty-six million is a ‘projection’ and not a ‘target’ – like the previous two, it could be an underestimate. Trying to second-guess a population figure forty years hence gets us nowhere, Burke has said, yet he ‘has no doubt’ that we can engage in much better planning for population growth than we have in the past.

The contradiction inherent in that statement reminded me of recent comments by Bob Carr: ‘I don’t know of any period in the nation’s history when people said that infrastructure had kept pace with population growth,’ the former NSW Premier wrote in Crikey. ‘The worst gap was in the 1950s when the roads of new suburbs were unpaved and Gough Whitlam’s children had to travel from Cronulla to the city to go to high school and people had to wait years for a PMG-delivered telephone connection and Queensland was an education slum…Federal and state governments struggle to keep pace. But struggle they always will. Increase the intake and the infrastructure gap will be more acute. South East Queensland makes the point.’

Tony Burke’s new role seems to have less to do with restricting numbers – whether of babies or migrants – than with trying to spread numbers around. ‘The populations issue depends on where you are,’ he has said. ‘There are parts of the country where people are in traffic gridlock and they ask, why add people to our part of the country? And there are parts where employers are crying out for more workers.’ But trying to stem the flow of people into big cities and send them instead into regional areas is like digging a trench on the beach to stop the tide coming in. Urbanisation is a global phenomenon, not an Australian proclivity.

More than half the world’s people already live in cities; by 2050 that figure will be two-thirds. In Overloading Australia (Enviro Books, 2010), Mark O’Connor and William J. Lines see urbanisation as the result of overpopulation in rural areas, overloading farm and forest until a ‘population of desperately poor peasants spills into congested cities’. City-o-ophile Jeb Brugmann takes the opposite view, describing urbanisation as ‘the largest grassroots movement in the world’: billions of people ‘voting with their feet’, an ‘utterly rational’ choice given the ‘incredible economic advantage’ that cities offer, and a process that cannot be stopped. ‘Governments try, or tried, some are still trying, for decades to subsidise rural living but the great advantage of being in dense settlement…where markets are created will continue this process of urbanisation.’
The economies of scale achieved by massing people in cities are obvious. In *Welcome to the Urban Revolution* (Penguin, 2009), Brugmann introduces two other economies, of density and association: ‘Without density of settlement, most of what we learn, produce, construct, organise, consume and provide as a service in the world would simply be too expensive,’ he writes. ‘Density increases the sheer efficiency by which we can pursue an economic opportunity.’ Together, economies of scale and density produce a third economy – an economy of association – by exponentially increasing the ‘variety of ways…people can organise, work together, invent solutions and launch joint strategies for urban advantage’ through ‘collaborative efficiency’.

An enthusiasm for cities should not be confused with an enthusiasm for population growth. The prospect of the global population peaking at around nine billion people by mid-century is alarming no matter which way you look at it – from the perspective of food, water, habitat, housing, poverty or conflict. As Garrett Hardin wrote more than forty years ago, in his seminal essay ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (first published in *Science* in 1968): ‘A finite world can support only a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero.’ This is not to say that rapid population growth lies at the root of every social problem. O’Connor and Lines verge on the hysterical by linking it to paedophilia in the Philippines, but they also show that it’s possible to implement successful family planning policies that use humour and intelligence rather than coercion, as has been done in Indonesia, Thailand and post-revolution Iran (yes, under the mullahs).

Kelvin Thomson has developed a fourteen-point plan to stabilise Australia’s population, which includes increasing Australia’s development aid to UN target levels and using more of the budget for family planning and the education of women and girls. There can be little argument with this.

He also wants to put population on the agenda of climate change talks. This is a newer and increasingly dominant strand in population arguments, but one that distracts from the drivers of global warming. David Satterthwaite, a development planner at the International Institute for Environment and Development, has shown that there is no intrinsic connection between population growth and emissions increases. Emissions are actually declining in Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Zambia, despite population growth of between 2.5 and 3.2 per cent in these countries. As Satterthwaite argues, it’s ‘growth in consumers and in their levels of consumption’ that drives emissions. He calculates that the wealthiest fifth of the world’s population account for more than 80 per cent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, while the poorest fifth account for just 1 per cent.

In the Australian context the argument linking climate change with population growth, and therefore migration, is more persuasive. ‘Australia’s per capita greenhouse emissions are many times greater than those of the Asian
countries from which most of our immigrants come and more than double those of the UK, which remains an important migrant source country,’ write Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy, two Monash University academics. So the ‘relocation of migrants to Australia, where they will soon achieve Australian living standards and energy consumption levels’, will add significantly to the global greenhouse burden. The argument is probably exaggerated. Many migrants who move to Australia from the developing world come from relatively affluent backgrounds, so their energy use may already be closer to Australian levels than to the average in their country of origin. Yet there is no doubt that continued migration makes the challenge of reducing Australia’s carbon emissions more daunting.

Birrell and Healy calculate that with a stable population Australia could achieve its target of cutting overall emissions by 60 per cent by 2050 by reducing annual emissions from twenty-four to 9.4 tonnes per person per annum. ‘However, if Australia’s population reaches 31.6 million by 2050, annual per capita emissions would have to fall to just 6.2 tonnes per person.’ With Australia’s population seemingly on track to reach thirty-six million by 2050, the task becomes proportionally harder.

This could easily morph into yet another excuse for delaying the transformation of our economy. A reduction to 9.4 tonnes would bring Australia’s per capita pollution levels close to the current European average, but Europe is cutting further and so must we. David Satterthwaite argues that a global ‘fair share’ of emissions per person would be around two tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, to allow the world’s ‘energy poor’ to increase their consumption.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the Birrell–Healy argument says that poor people should stay poor and stay in poor countries, so that we do not have to change our own lifestyle quite so radically. And this is the fundamental tension in the environment-versus-population debate. If concern about population is also a concern about human welfare, we should be facilitating more migration, not less, because the benefits of voluntary migration are incontrovertible. As the United Nations Development Programme’s 2009 Human Development Report notes, a family who migrates from Nicaragua to Costa Rica improves the chances of their child enrolling in primary school by a fifth. Migrant workers who move to the United States earn about four times as much as they would in the developing world, while Pacific Islanders shifting to New Zealand increase their wages threefold. The UNDP found that moving from a very poor country to a rich country reduced child mortality sixteen-fold. That those able and allowed to migrate are likely to be wealthier and healthier than average accounted for only a fraction of these gains.

The two hundred million international migrants in the world today make up around just 3 per cent of the world’s population, a share that has remained
remarkably stable over the past half-century. Only about a third of them (seventy million) have moved from ‘south’ to ‘north’ – the vast majority migrate within the developing world or between developed countries. The number of people moving within borders dwarfs the number crossing them. Using a conservative definition, the UNDP estimates that there are 740 million internal migrants around the world. Evidence of the benefits of this movement for human welfare are most obvious in China, where the winding back on restrictions on movement coincided with dramatic reductions in poverty, as massive flows of people shifted ‘towards regions with higher levels of human development’.

At around US$300 billion, the money that international migrants send home to families each year in remittances exceeds either foreign aid or foreign investment, and is less volatile than either. As the UNDP concludes, ‘while human mobility is not a panacea, its largely positive effects both for movers and stayers suggest that it should be an important component of any strategy to generate sustained improvements in human development around the world.’ International migration also helps reduce population growth: evidence suggests that migrant families have fewer children than they would have if they had stayed in their country of origin.

The UNDP’s approach to migration is inspired by the work of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and the idea that human development flows from the expansion of people’s freedom to ‘live their lives as they choose’. The decision to move is one of the basic actions individuals can take to achieve their goals, and philosophical support for freedom of movement stretches through time and across cultures: ‘Confucius wrote that “good government obtains when those who are near are made happy, and those who are far off are attracted to come,” while Socrates argued that “anyone who does not like us and the city, and who wants to emigrate to a colony or to any other city, may go where he likes, retaining his property.” In 1215, England’s Magna Carta guaranteed the freedom “to go out of our Kingdom, and to return safely and securely, by land or water.” More recently, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argued that mobility is one of a set of basic human functional capabilities that can be used to assess the effective freedom that individuals have to carry out their life plans.’

If, like the UNDP, we start from a commitment to international social justice, the consistent approach would be to argue for no border controls at all – anywhere – and to allow people to travel where they choose, whether for political or economic reasons. I am not a practising Christian, nor am I well versed in theology, but I suspect that this might be the same conclusion reached if policy recommendations were based on the teachings of Christ. It is also the position you might come to as a committed communist: international solidarity with the world’s poor and toiling masses must surely entail the belief that borders are instruments of capitalist oppression.
You can reach the same policy position from the standpoint of radical libertarianism, too: if the rights of the individual trump all else, as libertarians argue, and if there is no such thing as society, each individual should be free to move wherever he or she chooses. Equally a no-borders view is consistent with the philosophy of free-market economics: if human progress and liberty are best served by the free market, borders should be open to flows of people as well as goods and finance, because labour is a key unit of production.

Philosophical debates don’t assist us much in developing policy. Despite the rapid advance of globalisation, in an era when governments have given up many of their tools to restrict the international movement of money and goods, sovereignty is expressed more than ever in controlling the flow of people across borders. The primary organisational system in the world remains the nation state, and in liberal democracies like Australia it is the citizens of those bounded territories who elect governments and shape policies. By and large, it is the citizens of a state who have the power to decide, through their elected representatives, who comes to their country and the circumstances in which they come.

Nevertheless, thinking philosophically reminds us that when we discuss disembodied concepts like population and migration we are talking about real lives: about people and their needs, wants, capabilities and fears. If you accept that human rights are universal and indefeasible and no one person has a greater moral worth than any other – that the colour of a passport is the code for privilege or disadvantage and not a reflection of the intrinsic value or character of its holder – then the intersection of liberal democracy, national borders and humanitarianism presents serious moral difficulties.

Under Kelvin Thomson’s fourteen-point plan to stabilise Australia’s population at twenty-six million, net overseas migration would be limited to seventy thousand people each year. But Thomson is at pains to set himself apart from Hansonites. Under his program, Australia’s annual refugee intake would be increased from 13,500 to 20,000; family migration, which is made up almost entirely of spouses, would be held steady at 50,000; and skilled migration would be slashed to 25,000 per annum.

The demographer Peter McDonald warns that there are ‘considerable economic risks’ in cutting skilled migration when the demand for labour in Australia is likely to go on ‘far outstripping supply’. He believes cutting migration would fuel ‘wage inflation and interest rate rises’. Supporters of high migration often warn of the opposite scenario, arguing that zero net migration will lead to economic stagnation similar to that experienced in Japan, where interest rates have been cut to zero or below in failed attempts to boost demand.
When I put the risk of a wages breakout to Kelvin Thomson, he said – more or less – let business scream: ‘Population growth puts downward pressure on wages and incomes.’ It would be a ‘good thing’ if cuts to migration forced employers to pay workers more. ‘As a Labor politician I have no problem with truck drivers earning $150,000 in the mining industry.’ He also thinks cutting migration would force employers to invest in training the domestic workforce rather than relying on imported skills. He wants to boost government investment in vocational education by scrapping the baby bonus and restricting family payments for third and subsequent children – ploughing the savings into universities and TAFE colleges.

Thomson’s plan would also restrict the 457 visa scheme to professionals in health and engineering, and require all overseas students to return home for a ‘cooling-off period’ of at least two years before being eligible to apply for permanent residence.

But Thomson is the first to acknowledge that his agenda will be difficult to implement. According to the Housing Industry Association, home building and renovations contributed about $64 billion to Australia’s economy in the year to 30 June 2009, accounting for more than 5 per cent of GDP. The flow of benefits to related industries and services was almost three times that sum. It is a brave government that would attempt to wind back new housing starts, whether through planning rules to limit urban sprawl or by decisive measures to slow population growth.

Kelvin Thomson says property developers are the ‘chief advocates of continued population growth and high migration’ and their political influence is strong. There is now little time in politics for close personal relationships and re-election relies on a well-stocked campaign war chest, Thomson told me, so developers’ donations are ever more important. ‘Property developers sit next to MPs and ministers at functions and are in our ear all the time about population growth. And in these friendly conversations the environment gets stooged.’ Nor is government likely to ignore calls from the mining industry to allow skilled migrants – temporary or permanent – to fuel the resources boom.

Thomson wants us to break the assumed link between population growth and economic prosperity. Eight of the ten top-ranking countries in GDP per capita have small populations and very low rates of population growth, he explained – including Norway, The Netherlands, Sweden and Austria. Besides, he said, it’s a mistake to use GDP per capita as a key performance indicator. ‘We need a new measure of prosperity. One that would include factors like health and education levels, success in the protection of native wildlife, and rates of crime and drug use.’ But which of the two main political parties will go to the people and suggest that we should grow the economy more slowly because true prosperity is not measured in GDP?
A lot of Kelvin Thomson’s ideas make sense. Yet when I left his office and wandered back through the attractive chaos of Brunswick’s Sydney Road, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Australia’s new population debate is missing a key ingredient: people. I share Thomson’s and Ken Henry’s concerns that rapid population growth could harm Australia’s ecology and scarce resources like water. But I cannot help feeling that the population–environment debate is at least in part an exercise in shirking responsibility. Instead of making hard environmental decisions now, we blame migrants not yet arrived, and generations not yet born, for the predictable problems of the future.

To be sure, there are too many people in the world, and slowing and eventually reducing population growth must be an urgent global priority. But at its edges, the environmental critique of population is misanthropic. It is as if humans are good for nothing but wanton consumption and wilful destruction, and the world would be better off without us. Forgive me for breathing, but I think a world without people is a self-loathing step too far. Our world – whether natural or cultural – comes into being through human experience. This is a deeply anthropocentric view, but it doesn’t mean that the environment is simply there for us to plunder, or that there is no such thing as a limit to resources, or that every bit of pristine rainforest should have a tourist road put through it.

I agreed with Kelvin Thomson when he said, ‘we’re not so special that we have the right to trample everything else or that we are the only thing on earth that matters.’ Our survival as a species depends in part on our ability to be more humble in the face of nature – but it also depends on our ingenuity, the very same ingenuity that gave us condoms and contraceptive pills and vasectomies. People do not just consume: they also create. And migrants give as well as receive.

An acquaintance of mine is a former international student who completed her PhD in Melbourne on a scholarship funded by the Australian Government. A brilliant young woman who speaks several languages fluently, she now lives and works in Australia on a bridging visa. In an email she told me that the political debate about immigration had made her feel ‘extremely uncomfortable’ about staying in the country. Migrants are being blamed for every problem, she wrote, and the government’s only response is to ‘counter with the rationale that immigrants = workers = factor of production’.

She recognises that population growth is an issue but deeply resents the way migrants are treated ‘simply as numbers, to be manipulated as economic figures’. She thinks Australian citizens have yet to realise that there are migrants who ‘appreciate certain things in this country beyond the economy, who connect to the power of its landscape and aspire for more than a wage by the end of the month’.

In the postwar years we had New Australians to help us populate rather than perish. They were a weird mob, but gradually the established Australians came to
appreciate that these migrants brought much more to the country than a strong pair of arms. The wogs not only turned the cogs: they transformed and enriched society in myriad ways, and they helped us prosper.

In the twenty-first century Australia has a new species of *migrantus economicus*, whose purpose is to plug skills gaps in our economy, or spend their ‘holidays’ picking our fruit, or spend their education dollars propping up our tertiary education system. When their job is done and they are no longer required, we expect them to return home again, without complaint and without leaving a trace, apart from conveniently lowering our population growth rate as they show their passports at the immigration counter. Australians have forgotten the aphorism coined by the Swiss playwright Max Frisch in the era of the guest worker, *Man hat Arbeitskräfte gerufen, und es kommen Menschen*: we called for labour power, and we got human beings.

Successful in avoiding recession and in stoking the resources boom, Australia is drawing workers from around the world at a rapid rate. This is the ultimate irony – the population growth that ‘threatens our way of life’ is accelerated by the very prosperity that underpins it. The problem is not so much the escalation of our numbers but the escalation of our wants. Growing up in a house with only one bathroom did not mean my childhood was deprived. My parents were not unhappy because they lacked an ensuite and a walk-in robe. The average floor area of new homes increased by 40 per cent between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, even though the average number of people per household fell sharply during the same period. Our homes are now the largest in the world, though the blocks they cover are no larger. Mernda, in the aptly named Plenty Valley, is just one of many sites of collision between our growing numbers and our ever-inflating aspirations for ‘lifestyle without compromise’.

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