

C. Butler, *Population and Environment in Australia: A report commissioned by the Population and Environment Research Fund Committee of the Australian Academy of Science*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 2003

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Aims of the report

Dr Butler's report offers an overview of research on the relationship between population and sustainability in Australia and overseas, together with an introduction to the main lobby groups in Australia. Some of the research is indeed analysed but Butler claims that there is very little of it in Australia (pp. 5, 7, 17, 25). However, the situation is not as bad as he supposes: he has missed a fair body of serious work from geographers, ecologists, economists, and sociologists. (See titles in Appendix A. The authors included are serious scholars, most working either in universities or organisations such as the CSIRO.)

Lobbyists and general opinion

Butler's work on the lobby groups is helpful but incomplete, limited as it is to the business lobby and one environmental organisation, Sustainable Population Australia (SPA). His material on the business lobby is interesting. He sets out their justifications for immigration-fuelled population growth (increased economic competitiveness and economic growth, an offset to demographic ageing, and defence) (p. 30), but has little to say on whether their professed justifications for population growth reflect their underlying reasons. For example, many prominent advocates for growth have an interest in the housing and development industries and thus in an expanding domestic market.ⁱ Most support immigration but, as Butler reports, are uninterested in fertility; this suggests a focus on quick returns.

The paper provides a good introduction to SPA, as the key environmental group lobbying for population stability but misses the rift in the environmental movement over the population question. Butler notes, for example, that the Australian Conservation Foundation has done little work in this area in recent years (p. 30) but does not explore the reasons for their inactivity.ⁱⁱ Nor does he explore the parallels between the ACF's reluctance to engage with the population question and a similar reticence among environmentalists in the Australian Democrats Party,ⁱⁱⁱ the Greens Party,^{iv} and conservation movements overseas.^v

Of course, his brief is to look at research, not reasons for its absence. But most research involving social behaviour has a political dimension and, if we are to do more of it, we need to understand the political constraints. Butler does refer to the quasi-taboos on discussing carrying capacity and the fear that many scientists have that engagement with the topic could damage their credibility (see pp. 5, 8, 19, 43 n8, 45 n42). If we understand the reasons for this fear we may be able to move forward more confidently.

To return to the lobbyists and the general climate of opinion, the paper is silent on the ethnic lobby with its interest in family reunion, and the humanitarian lobby with its concern about asylum-seekers and refugees. It also says nothing about the current position of the unions. But Butler does refer to public opinion and the divide between the opinion of educated professionals, who tend to be pro-immigration and who are, of course, a numerical minority, and the majority of voters who are pro-stability. A further point could be drawn from this. The lobbyists are mainly drawn from the former category, leaving the majority with little voice. Again this situation has parallels overseas.^{vi}

Defence

As well as providing an overview of the existing terrain, Butler has an argument of his own to put: powerful external forces may impose a population increase on us and we need a strong economy and polity in a healthy natural environment in order to 'cope with this challenge' (p. 6). In one sense this is an old argument, but Butler has updated it and made it more plausible.

During the 1970s the old populate or perish argument was overtaken by a revised defence-based argument for immigration. In the revisionist argument natural increase became less relevant and immigration more relevant because the basis of the argument was internationalist morality not military strength: Australia

must be seen to be sharing its resources by way of a large immigration program in order to shore up its standing in world opinion. Defence would not be achieved by force of arms but by the perceived strength of our moral position. In 1979 David Scott put it like this:

The ‘populate or perish’ notion that fuelled the post-war immigration drive does not carry much weight today but, as is now often pointed out, in the eye of our neighbours, we need to be making good use of our spaces and/or resources. More people may be needed to legitimise our occupation of a sizable and well-resourced landmass.^{vii}

Similar positions were put by others.^{viii} They are still heard today^{ix} but it was always a weak argument. If a country faces an aggressor its moral position will be interpreted as the aggressor pleases: indeed even now, more than 30 years after the White Australia policy was formally and publicly buried, that policy still surfaces as a symbol of our alleged moral deficiency in hostility directed to us by those who are looking for an excuse.^x Butler’s contribution further undermines the revisionist argument. He questions whether a large immigration intake is in fact an act of international altruism. What about the brain drain as we cream off the best and brightest from the labour markets of poorer countries? And how does high immigration as a public gesture of virtue stand up in the context of low levels of foreign aid? (p. 26)

Butler returns us to a new version of the old argument: we need larger numbers of people for physical defence. Why? Because of the growing instability in our region and increasing calls on Australia’s defence forces to intervene overseas. His reasons for taking physical defence seriously are sensible. Continental invasion is unlikely^{xi} but, as current events have made clear, this does not mean that there are no threats. As civil war and the prospect of failed states increase Governments may see it as in the nation’s interests to deploy more troops overseas, while terrorism and people smuggling will continue to pose threats to the safety of Australians overseas and to our sovereignty at home.

But what are the links between the new defence threats and Australia’s population size and growth? Will larger numbers help us to meet defence goals? And could a large immigration intake affect the social cohesion that any society requires if its members are to make sacrifices for their common defence? In the new security environment these are important questions.

At present immigrants are rather less likely to volunteer for the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) than are the Australian-born. (In 1999 86 per cent of the personnel in the ADF were Australian-born, compared to 77 per cent of the population as a whole.)^{xii} Understandably, joining the ADF is not an immediate priority for new immigrants. But, as Butler acknowledges, there is also the possibility that high migration, by increasing ethnic diversity, may introduce new tensions into Australia’s political culture. There are also possible ramifications for the existing population. Though immigration is now less unpopular than it was in the early 1990s there is no constituency for a large intake.^{xiii} If large numbers of migrants should continue to be foisted onto a reluctant electorate Australians’ current low levels of trust in public institutions^{xiv} might deteriorate further. Declining levels of trust together with ethnic fragmentation could eventually change Australia from a nation whose members identify with one another and share a concern about their common future, to a geographic area where collections of individuals and factions pursue their own agendas and have no interest in making sacrifices for each other.

Skilled immigration and carrying capacity

Butler’s point about increasing the population via skilled migration and how this can actually increase carrying capacity would benefit from further explanation (cf pp. 19, 21). It is counter intuitive that, after the numbers required for a sophisticated division of labour and a domestic market have been achieved, further population growth can actually increase carrying capacity. Perhaps Butler means that this can happen through increasing human capital? It would be useful to know the circumstances in which an individual’s skill means that he or she, rather than adding to the human burden on the environment, actually lessens that burden to the degree that their contribution to it is negative. But perhaps Butler did not mean to imply a claim as strong as this?

The current immigration program

There is an error in the paper. Butler believes that both of the major parties have settled on bipartisan support for a low intake, the 'populist (population stabilization) view' (p. 5). This is not so. The Howard Government raised the intake in 2000-01 and in 2003-04 the official program was between 123,000 and 128,000.^{xv} Apart from three very high intake years in the late 1980s (average 135,000 p. a.), this figure is larger than at any time since 1975. (These numbers exclude emigrants, but they also exclude long-term temporary immigrants and New Zealanders. Currently the numbers of temporary migrants together with New Zealanders living in Australia exceeds one million.)^{xvi}

Conclusion

While I have pointed to a few shortcomings in the paper, overall I found it useful. It is encouraging to see more attention being paid to the problem of the relationship between the population and the environment. It is especially encouraging to see a natural scientist point out that sustainability is not just a question of numbers of people in the natural physical environment but that population growth also affects the social environment, and thus may affect the commitment we can muster to deal with our common problems.

Appendix A: Further research on the relationship between population growth and sustainability

(This list is not exhaustive; it is based on material that I have to hand.)

Population and the natural environment: Australia

- Birrell, R., and T. Birrell, *An Issue of People (second edition)*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1987 (Ch 8 "The brick wall: population and resource limits")
- Boyden, S., 'Economic and population growth: a biohistorical perspective', in L. Day and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988
- Boyden, S., S. Dovers and M. Shirlow, *Our Biosphere Under Threat: Ecological Realities and Australia's Opportunities*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990
- Crome, F., B. Foran and L. Moore, 'Linkages between Australia's population and its biodiversity loss', *People and Place*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1994, pp. 11-14
- Gartside, G., 'Can we grow our own fuel?', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia? Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982
- Hamilton, C., and H. Turton, 'Population policy and environmental degradation: sources and trends in greenhouse gas emissions', *People and Place*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1999, pp. 42-62
- Hamilton, C., 'Population growth and environmental quality: are they compatible?', *People and Place*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1-5
- Hamilton, N., 'Impacts of Australia's coastal population growth', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1995, pp. 24-29
- Harding, R., 'The debate on population and the environment: Australia in the global context' [Review article], *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1995, pp. 165-195
- Lowe, I., 'Australia's non-renewable resource base', in L. Day and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988
- Mardon, C., 'Limits to the supply of liquid fuels', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia: Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982
- Millington, R., and J. Kalma, 'Biophysical resource constraints: an overview', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia: Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982
- Nix, H., 'Australia's renewable resources', in L. Day and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988
- Powell, J. M., 'Environmental degradation, "sustainability" and the Murray Darling Basin', *People and Place*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1994, pp. 6-13
- Rawlinson, P., and I. Penna, 'Timber: the overextended resource', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia: Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982

- Seddon, G., 'Choosing a future or gamblers' luck?', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia: Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982
- Short, R., 'Australia: a full house', *People and Place*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1994, pp. 1-4
- Simpson, R. W., A. Petroeschevsky and I. Lowe, 'An ecological footprint analysis for Australia', *Australian Journal of Environmental Management*, vol. 7, March, 2000, pp. 11-28

Population, economy and society: Australia

- Birrell, B., and V. Rapson, 'Two Australias: migrant settlement at the end of the 20th century', *People and Place*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2002, pp. 10-25
- Daly, H., 'The steady-state economy: what, why, and how?', in R. Birrell, D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia: Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982
- Healy, E., and B. Birrell, 'Metropolis divided: the political dynamic of spatial inequality and migrant settlement in Sydney', *People and Place*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 65-87
- Joske, S., 'Economics and immigration policy', J. W. Smith (Ed.) *Immigration, Population and Sustainable Environments*, Flinders University Press Bedford Park, South Australia, 1991
- Lewis, M., 'Packing people', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2001, pp. 75-80
- Mitchell, W., 'The economic implications of high population growth', in L. Day and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988
- Mitchell, W., 'Why high levels of net migration present problems for unemployment and external debt stabilisation', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1996, pp. 40-45
- Peter, M., 'The use of the ORANI model in the immigration debate', *People and Place*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1993, pp. 27-34
- Stillwell, F., 'Australia's population: is stability uneconomic?', *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1997, pp. 1-6
- Whitelaw, J. S., and C. A. Maher, 'A tale of few cities: urbanisation in a constrained environment', in R. L. Heathcote and J. A. Mabbutt (Eds), *Land Water and People*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988
- Wilmoth, D., 'The urban impact of population growth', in L. Day and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988

Edited collections, on both population and the natural environment and population, economy and society: Australia

(Most of the contributors in these volumes are scholars and researchers; a few are advocates.)

- Wilkes, J. (Ed.), *How Many Australians? Immigration and Growth (Australian Institute of Political Science: Proceedings of the 37th Summer School)*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971
- Birrell, R., and C. Hay (Eds), *The Immigration Issue in Australia*, Department of Sociology, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 1978
- Birrell, R., L. Glezer, C. Hay and M. Liffman (Eds), *Refugees Resources Reunion: Australia's Immigration Dilemmas*, Victorian Commercial Teachers' Association, Melbourne, 1979
- Birrell, R., D. Hill and J. Stanley (Eds), *Quarry Australia? Social and Environmental Perspectives on Managing the Nation's Resources*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982 (See Mardon, Millington and Karma, Rawlinson and Penna, Gartside, and Daly above.)
- Birrell, R., D. Hill and J. Nevill (Eds), *Populate and Perish? The Stresses of Population Growth in Australia*, Fontana/ Australian Conservation Foundation, Sydney, 1984
- Day, L., and D. Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988 (See Boyden, Lowe, Mitchell and Wilmoth above)
- Smith, J. W. (Ed.), *Immigration, Population and Sustainable Environments*, The Flinders Press, Bedford Park, 1991

Overseas titles

Natural environment

- Demeny, P., 'Demography and the limits to growth', *Population and Resources in Western Intellectual Traditions: Population and Development Review*, supplement to volume 14, 1988

- Ehrlich, P., A. Ehrlich and G. Daily, 'Food security, population, and development', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1993, pp. 1-32
- Harrison, P., *The Third Revolution: Environment, Population and a Sustainable World*, I. B. Taurus, London, 1992
- Smil, V., 'Global population and the nitrogen cycle', *Scientific American*, July 1997, pp. 58-63

Economy and society

- Daly, H., and J. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy and a Sustainable Future* Beacon Boston, 1989
- Duchin, F., 'Population change, lifestyle and technology: how much difference do they make?', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1996, pp. 321-330
- Ekins, P., '“Limits to growth” and sustainable development', *Ecological Economics*, vol. 8, no. 1993, pp. 269-288
- Ekins, P., 'A sustainable consumer society: a contradiction in terms?', *International Environmental Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1991, pp. 243-258
- Freeman, G., 'Migration and the political economy of the welfare state', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 485, May, 1986, pp. 51-63

Notes

- ⁱ See M. Grattan, 'People power', *The Australian Financial Review*, 3 July 1998, p. 33; J. Koutsoukis, 'Double our migrants: industry', *The Age*, 8 February 1999; and the argument developed in R. Birrell and T. Birrell, *An Issue of People (second edition)*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1987.
- ⁱⁱ See J. Warhurst, 'The growth lobby and its opponents: business, unions, environmentalists and other interest groups', in J. Jupp and M. Kabala (Eds), *The Politics of Australian Immigration*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993, pp. 183-184, 199-202; E. Moore, 'A sustainable population for Australia; dilemma for the green movement', in J. W. Smith (Ed.), *Immigration, Population and Sustainable Environments*, Flinders University Press, Bedford park, South Australia, 1991. The ACF reluctantly supported the collection edited by Birrell et al. in 1984 (see Appendix A) but this was their last major foray into the population debate.
- ⁱⁱⁱ J. Coulter, 'Immigration — a battleground within the Australian Democrats', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2001, pp. 10-17
- ^{iv} N. Sloan and W. Lines, 'Party of principle? The Greens and population policy', *People and Place*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 16-23
- ^v See R. Beck and L. Kolankiewicz, *Forsaking Fundamentals: the Environmental Establishment Abandons U.S. Population Stabilization: Center Paper 18, March*, Center for Immigration Studies, Washington, 2001 <http://www.cis.org/articles/2001/forsaking/> (accessed 16/8/03).
- ^{vi} See R. Beck and A. Camerota, *Elite vs Public Opinion: An Examination of Divergent Views on Immigration*, Center for Immigration Studies, Backgrounder 14-02, Washington, 2002; this divergence has been analysed in a masterly theoretical paper: G. Freeman, 'Modes of immigration politics in liberal democratic states', *International Migration Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1995, pp. 881-901
- ^{vii} D. Scott, 'Australia's population responsibilities: an evaluation', in L. G. R. Birrell, C. Hay, and M. Liffman (Ed.), *Refugees Resources Reunion: Australia's Immigration Dilemmas*, VCTA Publishing, Melbourne, 1979, p. 75
- ^{viii} See for example: T. Palfreeman, 'Non-European immigration into Australia', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 29, no. 1975, pp. 354; T. B. Millar, 'From Whitlam to Fraser', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. no. 55, 1977, pp. 871-2; S. Harris, 'The Brandt Commission Report and its significance for Australia', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 36, no. 1982, p. 37; P. J. Flood, 'Population growth and foreign policy', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 32, no. 1978, pp. 53, 64.
- ^{ix} See Gobbo, Fraser, Pell and Berg quoted in B. Birnbauer, 'A land half-full', *The Age (News Extra)*, Melbourne, 14 March 1998, p. 4. See also Kerry Packer in K. Childs, 'And after this break, another Packer drama?', *The Age*, 21 January 1987, p. 11
- ^x For example the second in command of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri is reported to have claimed responsibility on behalf of his organisation for the bombing of Jakarta's Marriott Hotel. He said that the attack was 'a fatal slap on the face of America and its allies in Muslim Jakarta, where the faith has been

denigrated by the dirty American presence and the discriminatory Australian presence'. Quoted in S. Powell et al., 'Bali bombers' Jakarta link', *The Australian*, 13 August 2003, p. 1. It is also possible for internal critics to claim that, whatever the Government is alleged trying to do, it is in fact practicing discrimination or behaving in a racist fashion. See M. Seccombe and A. Clennell, 'White Australia Policy revisited, says Labor MP', <http://www.australianpolitics.com/news>, (accessed 19 September 2001).

^{xi} A range of defence reports make this clear. See for example Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p. 52

^{xii} Roy Morgan Research, *Australian Defence Force: 1999 Census: Final Report*, Melbourne, November 1999, p. 33; Dibb Report, *The Defence of Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987, pp. 20-6, 91-93. The key policy document on defence published in 1997 does not even mention the size of the population as a factor. See Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, Department of Defence, Canberra, 1997.

^{xiii} See M. Goot, 'More "relaxed and comfortable": public opinion on immigration under Howard', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, pp. 46-60; K. Betts, 'Immigration and public opinion: understanding the shift', *People and Place*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2002, pp. 24-37

^{xiv} See the series of polls on trust from 1976 to 2001 listed with 'Election Focus Sees Health Professionals, Educators Top Most Ethical and Honest List' The Roy Morgan Research Centre Pty. Limited <http://www.roymorgan.com.au/> (accessed 12 January 2002)

^{xv} K. Betts, 'Immigration policy under the Howard Government', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2003, pp. 169-192. Labor has not challenged this increase.

^{xvi} *ibid.*, pp. 180-182.