

Doug Cocks, *People Policy: Australia's Population Choices*, UNSW Press, 1996, pp. xvii + 347 (inc. index), RRP \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 0 86840 247 8
Katharine Betts

[Published in *The Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, vol. 85, no. 1997, pp. 125-127]

There is no hidden agenda in Doug Cocks', *People Policy*. The author tells us in his preface that he has written his book because he wants to force the population question into the arena of political debate and convince us that Australia already has enough people, that we can stop growing and that the goal of demographic stability is important. But his work is no tirade against growth. Indeed, for the first 10 chapters he does not play the role of advocate at all. The arguments for and against stability are presented fairly and extensively. He is particularly concerned with the environmental arguments and develops an extensive exploration the question of whether environmental problems are exacerbated by population growth. But, even if they are, he acknowledges that population management may not be the best or the only policy response.

In the final chapters Cocks goes on to examine the population choices which offer us the best chance of living in a civilised society 50 years from now, a society which offers us the chance of "quality survival" with the option to pursue broader goals than those of simply struggling to meet material needs.

There is much information in this book and many theories. Some of the ideas will be familiar to readers with an interest in the population problem but because Cocks has traversed a wide range of disciplines and schools of thought, there is sure to be something to surprise and stimulate every one in his pages. Perhaps his concept of "ideas in good currency", or of "ecological footprints", or his treatment of "social technology", or his approach to the idea of an optimum population as a "wicked" problem, or the theory of thresholds of change will catch the reader's eye and help him or her to see old problems from a new perspective. Or it may be that such an opportunity will come from Cocks' overview of complex adaptive systems, or his suggestion that patriotism is a "tremendous resource" and an invaluable part of our human and social capital, or from his lessons in practical reasoning which demonstrate the poverty of arguments based on authority or on *ad hominem* attacks.

These ideas are drawn on as he explores the substantive arguments about the effects of population growth on economic growth, trade, labour markets, urbanisation, congestion, Government budgets, defence, natural amenity, resource availability, residue sinks, environmental quality, natural disasters, health, cultural richness and social cohesion. He also makes use of them when he considers arguments about population growth and stability drawn from ethics and social justice, arguments which lead him to analyse the effects demography on inter-generational equity, on other species and on Australia's role as a member of the global community.

Cocks ranges over this broad field with good-natured confidence. In simple, direct language he presents us with an overview of the themes that we should be debating as we analyse the present, and the range of possibilities for the future, in order to determine a population policy. Calls for a such a policy have been growing in recent years: the Withers report recommended that we adopt one in 1991, as did the Jones report and Tim Flannery (in *The Future Eaters*), both in 1994. So far Government has resisted. Of course, we do have a de facto population policy which helps shape natural increase and actively recruits large numbers of immigrants. (As Cocks puts it, all

countries have a population policy, implicit if not explicit, just as everyone who is not bald must have a hair style.)

What would an explicit population policy be like? One thing is certain it would not mean settling on a target population figure today and aiming for that target over the next 50 years no matter what. The unforeseen must always be allowed for; constant revision would be a part of such a policy. (What else could you expect when dealing with a wicked problem?) The United Nations defines a population policy as:

...measures and programmes designed to contribute to the achievement of economic, social, demographic, political and other collective goals through affecting critical demographic variables, namely the size and growth of the population, its geographic distribution (national and international) and its demographic characteristics...(quoted on p. 21)

Taking the United Nations' definition as a reference point, Cocks asks why Australia does not have such a policy. His response necessarily focuses on immigration rather than on natural increase. This is because immigration policy is the aspect of our de facto population policy which is most important in both political and demographic terms. The answer he provides runs as follows. There are a range of lobby groups focussed around immigration, and by and large the anti-stability, pro-growth interests are in the ascendant. Governments respond to this balance of pressures by continuing to pursue large immigration targets. But even though the level of public debate is poor, this outcome is unpopular. High immigration continues in the face of low-level public opposition because the costs of population growth are diffuse, and because the pro-stability lobbyists lack a strong institutional base. (Here his treatment of the concentrated benefits of growth versus the diffuse costs echoes Gary Freeman's recent work in the United States.¹)

Cocks concludes that Australia's de facto population policy is driven by short-term pressures from sectional interest groups. It is for this reason that no Government wants to make the process public and explicit. Why should the policy élite broadcast to the community that the common good is taking second place to sectional interests? Followers of *Yes Prime Minister* will see that this situation is indeed a good reason for the politicians' bipartisan "no-policy policy".

This state of affairs leads to a population/immigration debate which, Cocks says, is rather like a Samuel Beckett play. The stage is disorganised. The actors speak in code or shout while wearing earplugs. Most are disguised as the same character, someone called The National Interest, while the floor is covered with sleeping figures called Joe Public. A chorus of good burghers chant old verities off stage. Occasionally Chicken Lickin bursts in to say the sky is falling, only to be rebuked by No Worries who descends on a sky hook to tell us that the sky is in fact still held aloft. Sometimes one of the choristers wanders on stage to listen and picks up a slightly altered new verity. This is taken back stage and occasionally a few others adopt it. The plot does not show any obvious progression except that, by the final scene, we realise that the chorus has been slowly changing its chant throughout the play.

This is a captivating analogy. Cocks served as consultant to the Jones inquiry. Did it come to him as he attended committee meetings and public hearings and read the submissions? But it's no way to run a country. In his opinion we need an explicit policy, not a postmodern theatrical experience. Such a population policy should have seven components: immigration policy, natural increase policy, Aboriginal policy, tourist and

visitor policy, overseas aid policy, internal migration policy, and education policy (p. 219).

People Policy is well-informed, logical book which gives serious attention to moral problems as well as to practical questions. It invites us to consider the purpose of our lives, our place in the world, and a future worth working for. “What is the point of saving Australia if the Australia we have to create in order to save Australia is not worth saving?” (p. 305). A population policy is not an end in itself any more than economic rationalism can be an end in itself. We have a moral right to make choices about our future and a duty to do so.

It is a delight to see so many arguments set out and considered with the care and self assurance of one who has fully mastered his brief. The argument against stability gets the best possible consideration and the case for stability is examined rigorously.

Cocks sets his argument within the framework of the merits of a population close to its present size, 18 million, versus one twice the size, 36 million. (The figure of 36 million is the largest which he thinks worthy of rational consideration. The question of discussing numbers below 18 million is ruled out, for this volume at least.) He judges that a figure much closer to 18 million than to 36 will maximise the following goals: urban environmental and social quality of life; the quality and availability of resource-based goods and services; and the sustainable use of global resources. (This last is because Australians consume more goods and services per head than the world average.) A figure closer to 18 million will also minimise the chance of fostering antagonism between community groups. It is these four goals which are the core of the pro-stability case. Against this he argues that a figure closer to 36 million might mean a marginal increase in the following: the chance of Australia helping the world's poor and displaced; the chance of a higher GDP per head; and improving defence.

But the effects of population growth on these seven outcomes vary. Growth has a substantial effect on cities and the social quality of life, and on resource-based goods and services, and on the risk of social disharmony. Its effects on the other four goals are much smaller. It is this relative weighting of the seven goals that leads him to conclude that a stable population in Australia would do more to enhance the common good (for Australia and the wider world) than growth. This conclusion is strengthened by two additional arguments: the need to guard against unforeseen and possibly unmanageable externalities of growth and the obligation to counter the inequitable effects of growth, given that it leads to significant numbers of “uncompensated losers” (p. 187).

Cocks puts the case for stability cogently and well but it is not this that gives the book its greatest value. Rather his two main contributions are these. First, the case against stability and for growth is set down at length. This should enable all parties, the growth enthusiasts, the undecided, and the critics, to stop shouting, take out their ear plugs and think and listen. Second, the case for an explicit population policy is put and put so well that it is irrefutable.

There are other books which present the case for stability² but there are none to my knowledge devoted to arguing the case against stability and for growth. Some, such as the collections edited by Easson in 1990³ and by Birrell et al. in 1979,⁴ contain arguments that Australia can cope with population growth, or that the effects of growth are neutral, but this does not amount to a clear positive case. Such an argument for growth must be looked for in official reports, such as the economic case presented in Chapter 3 of the FitzGerald report,⁵ or in newspaper columns.⁶ It is a pity that the

intellectual wing of the growth lobby has not developed a sustained argument in print. Cocks has done them a service by presenting it for them. But as he is a self-confessed “stabilist”, they might prefer to do it for themselves.

Nevertheless, the first priority of people who take a long-term view of Australia’s needs and problems should not be to convert environmentalists to growth or growth enthusiasts to an ecological perspective and the precautionary principle. The first priority should be to persuade the policy élite of the need for a population policy, an explicit policy which subsumes immigration rather than an implicit policy driven by immigration. Cocks has his own ideas about what that policy should contain and the direction it should take but even if there should be a policy which contains different elements and pursues different objectives this would be preferable to the current no-policy policy. Stabilists and the disaffected general public would be better able to accept an explicit, clearly stated policy which went against their own preferences for Australia’s future than a set of outcomes emerging haphazardly from the pressure cooker of short-term sectional interests.

In 1994 the then Minister for Immigration, Senator Bolkus, rejected the idea of a population policy on the grounds that it “would not be appropriate for Australia, given ...[the] diversity of community views as to the character and objectives of such a policy.”⁷ Clearly the Minister feared that articulating an explicit policy could have meant that opposing points of view would be brought forward and that arguments might have become heated.

But avoiding a population policy has not ensured communal peace. In September 1996 Pauline Hanson made her maiden speech in Parliament and precipitated yet another “immigration debate” in the media. There was indeed some debate but there was a great deal more shouting and failures to listen. The great Hanson “debate” was depressingly similar to the Geoffrey Blainey “debate” of 1984 and the John Howard affair of 1988. Insults were traded, reputations bruised, relations with Asian countries may or may not have been damaged, and many choristers rang their hands in despair at yet another breach of communal civility.

Cocks makes it clear that the debate about population is not about multiculturalism or racism. It is about population. If the Keating Government had heeded recommendations that Australia have a population policy, the uproar sparked by Hanson’s speech and her subsequent remarks might have been deflected into a more rational discussion about Australia’s demographic future and our national goals. Slanging matches about multiculturalism and Asianisation and about who was or was not a racist and/or a McCarthyist could have been minimised.

The status quo is not serving us well. Perhaps the present Government will decide that deliberate inattention to demography, a question which is vital for the nation’s present and future welfare, now presents a greater political risk than would a policy policy.

It is traditional to end a favourable review with fault finding and I will do so. The author has not provided us with page numbers for his in-text references; some of his in-text references are not in his bibliography; and the index is not completely adequate. These deficiencies are not crippling but they do create difficulties for the many people who will want to use this book as a resource.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary Freeman, “Modes of immigration politics in liberal democratic states”,
International Migration Review 24 (no. 4 1995) 881-901

² See for example: Robert Birrell, Doug Hill and Jon Nevill (Eds), *Populate and Perish? The Stresses of Population growth in Australia* (Sydney, Fontana/ Australian Conservation Foundation 1984); Lincoln Day and Don Rowland (Eds), *How Many More Australians?* (Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1988); Joseph Wayne Smith (Ed.), *Immigration, Population and Sustainable Environments* (Bedford Park, The Flinders Press 1991).

³ Michael Easson (Ed.), *Australian and Immigration: Able to Grow?* (Sydney, Pluto Press in Association with the Lloyd Ross Forum 1990)

⁴ Robert Birrell, Leon Glezer, Colin Hay and Michael Liffman (Eds), *Refugees Resources Reunion: Australia's Immigration Dilemmas* (Melbourne, Victorian Commercial Teachers' Association 1979)

⁵ Stephen FitzGerald (chairman), *Immigration: A Commitment to Australia* (Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service 1988)

⁶ See for example: Malcolm Fraser “Give us more people and we'll be a power”, *The Australian*, 20 December 1995, 13.

⁷ *Australia: National Report on Population for the United Nations International Conference on population and Development, Cairo 1994* (Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service 1994), 7