

A review of Mark O'Connor, *This Tired Brown Land*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998
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Mark O'Connor describes the limited potential of Australia to support more people and tries to explain why the truth about these limits is so widely ignored.

Few people with any knowledge of environmental indicators would quarrel with his starting premise; it is, for example, well documented in the CSIRO's 1996 report, *State of the Environment*. Australia is an arid continent with poor topsoil, much of it already degraded. Under the pressure of its present human population it is losing much of its biodiversity. Yes, we could diminish our impact if we all used fewer resources but this is not happening. In fact we are using more. On a per capita basis, energy consumption in Sydney increased by 30 per cent per head between 1970 and 1990, water consumption by 25 per cent, and food consumption by 92 per cent (largely due to increased consumption of grain-fed animals).

Why do we continue to have a substantial immigration intake and why are the limits to population growth so widely ignored? O'Connor's exploration of population politics offers an intriguing mix of explanations. The main agent is the growth lobby, a small collection of interest groups who do well out population growth. A few are employers looking for cheaper labour but most have interests in property development (and some are closely associated with the commercial media). But the hucksters who argue that Australia's future lies in investing in real estate have a strange band of allies, the cultural elitists who argue that opposition to immigration-fuelled population growth is nothing but poorly sublimated racism.

O'Connor does not deny that there is unkindness, and worse, between people of different races in Australia but he argues that the supposed problem of racism has been inflated to such a degree that it has little relation to reality. He presents us with the image of the 'racist spectre' which many writers, commentators and journalists believe to haunt the land. He finds belief in this spectre to be 'a self-serving version of the Australian cultural cringe', self-serving because the act of denigrating others as racists absolves the denigrator from any contamination with the foulness that the spectre spreads. It also goes hand-in-hand with a reluctance to define *racism* which allows the ghost hunters to find their spectre where ever they wish.

Members of the cultural elite whom O'Connor identifies in the media, the universities and in some branches of politics often think of themselves as left-wing. But his analysis reminds of just how meaningless the terms *left* and *right* have become in many of the key debates affecting Australia's future, especially the population debate. Left-wing detectors of racism have little sympathy for the working people who bear the costs of population growth; their legitimate questions and complaints are dismissed as xenophobia. O'Connor says that the argument that the people must not be given the power to express their views because their views are barbaric is a classic right-wing position, whatever the self-identification of the groups who profess it. The intelligentsia who wish to suppress debate are not democrats and therefore their claims to speak for the left are false. Such sympathies as they have are focused on the ethnic grievance industry, a sector which has been conditioned to echo their own prejudices.

Some of the cultural elitists O'Connor describes are in the grip of what he calls the *Antarctica Fallacy*. This holds that Australia is not a real nation with a right to control its borders but just a space on the map, like Antarctica—governed by international treaties and open to whoever wants to come. Some even argue that the very generosity with which Australia has welcomed immigrants means that Australians no longer own their country and have no right to limit future immigration. In its extreme form the Antarctica Fallacy amounts to the claim that Australia is a cultural *terra nullius*. If one has not attended the immigration conferences where the spectre hunters and their protégés forgather, the claim that more than a handful of people hold such a notion may seem bizarre, but in such situations it is self-evident.

The Antarctica Fallacy casts doubt on our right to control our borders and the racist spectre is a gift to the growth lobby. Not only does it keep the lid on criticism, it provides a delightfully easy target. Property developers and other groups which profit from population growth would much rather argue against the evils of racism than defend their special interests.

The book names organisations and spokespeople, provides dates and circumstances and the argument is plausible. So what should we make of it? How are the actions of the main players to be explained?

The activities of the growth lobby are easy to understand. Though greed and disregard for the needs of one's compatriots are depressing, they are all too commonplace. But what about the racism detectors who, with anxious vigilance, censor and suppress debate? How do we account for them? O'Connor has a most intriguing theory.

Despite their elitism, many of the people involved do describe themselves as left-wing. Some have simply caught a fashionable idea which gives them a certain cachet; the lesser orders are racist but they are not. Others are sincerely convinced by this fashionable idea and believe they have a genuine cause to fight. But some are Labor Party strategists, and thus they are indeed 'left' by occupation if not conviction. O'Connor claims that this last group deliberately uses the idea of racism in order to keep migrants insecure.

He argues that newly arrived immigrants are usually poor and have to struggle to establish themselves. It is natural for them to gravitate to the Labor Party. But as they find their feet in Australia, they are inclined to move towards the conservatives. (He says that in some immigrant circles people lose face if, after a decade or two in Australia, they are still known as Labor supporters; such sympathies are taken as a sign that they have failed to make good.) How should Labor respond to this unfortunate side-effect of assimilation and upward mobility? The answer is to play on the immigrants' feelings of anxiety by telling them that the country abounds with racists and that only the Labor Party has the will to protect them.

A Labor strategist outlined the tactic to O'Connor: 'We know this stuff can get up the noses of ordinary Australians, but it's on the fringe for them. They've hardly noticed it yet. Of course the game won't last forever, but we can get the migrant vote right now by knocking Aussies, and it will be years before that costs us as many votes from Mr and Mrs Average as it gets us from Giuseppe Immigrant'. The game probably is up now. But it is difficult for Labor to distance itself from the grievance industry it has helped promote. It has also created many true believers in its own ranks and in various specialists centres for migrant studies and

within the media. Indeed O'Connor's chapter documenting the grip which the 'racist spectre' has on the ABC and the way in which this has stifled debate about population growth is disturbing.

O'Connor also draws our attention to a feature of the population debate which has always been puzzling but is especially odd now that the push for a higher migrant intake is gaining steam once again. There is plenty of research which shows that population growth is at worst harmful or at best unnecessary. There is none which demonstrates a net benefit. For seven long years—1989 to 1996—the Bureau of Immigration Research tried to prove that population growth brought net national benefits but the facts resisted and the task was impossible. However, for many population boosters it is as if none of this work had been done. They themselves do not write books or do research; they write newspaper columns and produce glossy pamphlets which make vague and unsubstantiated claims for the benefits of growth. And they rest their case on these slender productions.

Recently Con Sciacca (shadow Minister for Immigration) and Kim Beazley have been telling us we need more immigration to help defend the country and to ward off the ageing of the population. In the last 25 years there have been five official reports on Australia's defence needs and the action which should be taken to meet these needs. None of these reports argue that we should increase our population (and all emphasise that Australia is not at risk of invasion). Over the last 15 years there has also been a large body of demographic work which shows that immigration will do very little to offset the ageing of the population.

Public figures who want to argue for population growth clearly think that it is safe to use childish and discredited arguments. Perhaps they feel this way because they know that the media watchdogs will be out looking for racists and thus too busy to check the details of their case?

The demographic research demonstrates that if people are concerned about the ageing of the population they should try to help Australian parents have the two-child families which they say they want. That of course would require attention to social welfare and the needs of working women. But the population boosters ignore demography. They prefer to rail against xenophobia and, like cargo-cultists, look hopefully towards the skies for new plane-loads of immigrants.

How strange it is that reformers such as O'Connor who base their work on sound research on the environmental, social and economic impact of population growth are constantly asked about their supposed hidden agenda. ('Are you sure you're not really a front for racists?') The boosters waiting for easy profits are never asked about theirs.

This is a timely book with analyses questions at the core of the choices we need to make about Australia's future. It is also the work of a gifted writer, expressed with verve and a sense of the dramatic. Read it, if only to exorcise the racist spectre and improve your capacity to detect boosters.