

POPULATION POLICY: MAJOR PARTY POSITIONS

■ **Katharine Betts**

The author outlines recent developments in the politics of population policy in Australia.

One year ago *People and Place* published a series of articles on population policy. These provided the demographic background and set out the positions of the two major political groupings, the Governing Coalition (Liberal and National Parties) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP—the main opposition party).¹ Duncan Kerr, the then Labor Shadow Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, wrote that his party was thinking seriously of adopting a population policy, if only to avoid attempts by the Government to paint the ALP as the party opposed to reductions in the immigration program.²

In contrast Philip Ruddock, the Government Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, argued that Australia did not need a population policy. This was because, in his view, Australia was heading for a total population of 'around 23 million in 25 to 35 years time and would [then] be growing only very slowly' and that most people would be content to accept this outcome.³

LABOR'S POPULATION POLICY

The ALP did subsequently adopt a population policy at its national conference in Hobart in January 1998. Excerpts from this are reproduced below.

Labor recognises the need to plan for our future and will in government develop a formal national population policy. [This] will allow Australia to decide as a community the long term sustainable population we want rather than allowing

population issues to be an incidental by-product of ad hoc, year by year political decisions about annual immigration levels. Labor will ensure immigration levels are set within the framework of a population policy fashioned in Australia's interest.

... Labor will restructure the existing visa classification system to better reflect our national priorities. Australians are entitled to live with their families in Australia. Labor will not include husbands, wives and children in the discretionary component of the immigration program — family migrants are people who want to set down roots, and they develop strong and enduring bonds to the nation. Labor rejects the idea that governments have the right to deny to any Australian the right to marry and form a family with the partner of his or her choice.

... Labor will administer a fair refugee and humanitarian program which will allow those who can demonstrate that they have a well founded fear of persecution if they are returned to their country of origin to have our protection. Labor is committed to a genuine, independent and accessible review mechanism to assess decisions taken on migrants and refugees.

... The size of the annual intake for the balance of the program will be determined subject to the population policy framework. Within this, Labor will insist that skilled migration is linked to labour market needs. The untargeted independent visa class will be scaled back. Labor will also maintain programs to encourage the

transfer of resources and technology to Australia through business migration. An aged parent scheme and a preferential relative scheme will be maintained.⁴

THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

Philip Ruddock said in 1997 that Australia did not need a population policy, and has continued to speak of 23 million as the likely number at which the population will stabilise. For example, in announcing the planned intake of 80,000 visaed immigrants for 1998-1999 in April this year he said:

Based on a migration program of this size and projected fertility levels, Australia's population should peak at around 23-million people before the middle of next century.⁵

Under certain fertility assumptions this projection could be correct (see excerpts from Ruddock's letter to Alan Jones et al. reproduced below and the contribution from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). It is also true that the Coalition Government has reduced the visaed permanent immigration intake since it came into office in March 1996 (see Table 1 in the article by Birrell and Rapson this issue). The Hawke and Keating Government had reduced the figures in response to the recession of the early 1990s, but during the period when Senator Nick Bolkus was Minister (1993 to March 1996), the program was pushed up again.

PLANNED IMMIGRATION AND FUTURE DEMOGRAPHY

The annual planning figure does not necessarily mirror the gross intake of permanent arrivals because it does not include settler arrivals from New Zealand. Moreover, temporary movement has also produced net surpluses in many recent years (and net deficits

during the recession of the early 1990s). On the other side of the equation, residents leave Australia, some temporarily, some permanently. Gross emigration can be hard to predict if only because large movements out of the country during economic recessions produce sharp fluctuations.

For all these reasons there is an a gap between planned immigration and the actual difference that net international movement makes to Australia's demography. Critics of the Minister's position doubt that the current planned intake (set at 80,000 p.a.) will produce a net outcome below 70,000. They also point to the official population projections published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). These show that, if the total fertility rate were to stay at 1.85, a migrant intake which nets 70,000 per annum would take us to 26 million in 2051. At this point the population would still be growing, with no prospect of stability in sight. If fertility should fall to 1.75 (and the most recently published data show it at 1.80 in 1996), the 2051 figure would be 24.8 million and, again, the numbers would still be rising.⁶

Working from these projections the critics have argued that the claim that we are on course for a stable population of around 23 million does not mesh with its current immigration policy. Table 1 shows that the Government has reduced the planned intake from the levels set by the Keating Government in its last two years, but that data on net outcomes are still unavailable.

It also shows that in the eight years between 1989-90 and 1996-97 the average planned intake was 96,100 while the net average total number added to the population was 73,900, more than 26,000 (or 26.1 per cent) lower. If these figures were to be projected into the future, and

the present Government's planned intake were to remain at 80,000, this record suggests that we might expect a net total figure of just under 60,000. However, the reforms which have been instituted over the past two years suggest that a planning figure of 80,000 will produce a net figure rather lower than this. For example, new policies which put immigrants from New Zealand on the same footing as other immigrants by requiring them to wait two years before applying for welfare benefits may reduce the net Trans-Tasman flow. (See article by Birrell and Rapson in this issue.)

Table 1: Planned intake of visaed immigrants and net total migration: 1989-90 to 1998-99 ('000s)

	Planned intake of visaed immigrants	Net total migration
1989-90	140.0	96.7
1990-91	126.0	67.2
1991-92	111.0	34.9
1992-93	80.0	36.6
1993-94	76.0	59.0
1994-95	86.0	106.9
1995-96	96.0	110.7
1996-97	86.0	78.9
1997-98	80.0	n.a.
1998-99	80.0	n.a.
average	96.1	73.9

Note: Averages are for the full ten years of planning data and for eight years for net total migration. The net total migration figure is a simple measure of all arrivals (permanent and temporary) minus all departures.

The ALP was in power until March 1996. Bob Hawke was Prime Minister until December 1991 and Paul Keating from that date until March 1996 when the ALP lost Government to the Coalition, and John Howard (Liberal) became Prime Minister.

Sources: Media releases from the Immigration Department and *Australian Demographic Statistics, Catalogue No. 3101.0*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, various issues

It is unfortunate that the ABS projections (published in 1996) did not include a series showing the levels of fertility and migration which would take us to a stationary population of 23 million. But the article by Kippen and McDonald in this issue suggests that a fertility rate close to 1.8 combined with net migration of 60,000 until 2047, with immigration rising thereafter, could produce this outcome.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

If it is indeed the case that a majority of Australians would accept the goal of 23 million there may not be a great deal of distance between the Minister and his critics. But the lack of a population policy provides room for mistrust, dissension and misinformation. If the Government were to adopt an explicit population policy, the nature of the demographic variables shaping the population's size and structure would be more widely discussed and the basic demography would be better understood. Politicians and interested members of the public could begin a serious debate about the environmental and social implications of an established set of numbers. More time could be then be devoted to the implications of numerical outcomes and less to unproductive exchanges about the diversity of official and semi-official projections.

It was with these thoughts in mind that a group of scholars and scientists published a letter in the *Melbourne Age* on 14th of March this year. Though it had 18 signatories, only one (Tim Flannery) was named in *The Age*. The main instigators of the letter were Flannery and Alan Jones; we reproduce its text below, together with the full list of signatories. (Copies of the letter were sent to Senator Minchen and forwarded to the Prime Minister and then to Philip Ruddock.)

Population and the environment .

We are writing to express our deep concern over the lack of a national population policy. This issue has particular currency because the immigration intake levels will soon be decided.

The continuing decline of the Australian environment, as documented in the 1996 State of the Environment Report, is alarming and contrary to the goals of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) set by the Council of Australian Governments.

The SoE Report, the ESD Committee on Population and the Australian Academy of Science all agree that our population size, and high rate of growth relative to comparable affluent countries, are prime factors causing this decline.

In 1994, the House of Representatives committee for long term strategies published the findings of its inquiry into the future population of Australia. The report called strongly for a community-wide debate to precede and inform the development of a national population policy.

In 1995 the Australian Academy of Sciences published the results of the symposium on population, which included a joint statement by the Academy's working party. Point six is:

It is therefore essential that the issue of the continent's population become part of national debates over our future. From such debates, the Federal Government must develop a policy on population, which should include the issue of population size.

We believe that social, economic and environmental issues make the development of a population policy a matter of national urgency. This policy should be consistent with the goals and principles of ESD. It would inform and make transparent Government decisions in relevant areas.

The Government rightly takes into account humanitarian, family reunion and economic issues when determining migration

levels. As well, since population size affects every Australian and every river, valley and harbor of Australia, it is essential that population size also be considered. For this to be done, a national population policy is essential.

Katharine Betts (sociologist)

Charles Birch (biologist)

Bob Birrell (sociologist)

Doug Cocks (environmental scientist)

Hal Cogger (biologist)

Tim Flannery (ecologist)

Dean Graetz (environmental scientist)

Des Griffin (biologist)

Neil Hamilton (geographer)

Alan Jones (ecologist)

Jetse Kalma (environmental engineer)

Ian Lowe (environmental scientist)

Henry Nix (environmental scientist)

Harry Recher (ecologist)

Jon Stone (medical scientist)

Frank Talbot (ecologist)

Chris Watson (soil scientist)

Bill Williams (ecologist)

As it turned out the program announced by the Minister in April 1998 held the visaed intake stable at 80,000 for 1998-99 (see article by Birrell and Rapson, this issue). The Minister later defended his Government's decision not to adopt a population policy in a letter to Alan Jones. This letter is reproduced at the end of this article.

CURRENT ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN POPULATION POLICY AND A COMMITMENT TO LOW GROWTH

Many proponents of an explicit population policy are environmentalists concerned to moderate the human impact on Australia's natural and built environment. They assume that an explicit policy will lead to a considered approach to growth and a balanced assessment of its effects. Rational men and women would then look and the

evidence, conclude that small was better, and adjust social policies, including immigration policies, accordingly.

But there at least two other possibilities. Policy makers might look at the settings and decide that a larger population would be preferable (perhaps for economic or strategic reasons). Or politicians might adopt a population policy couched in soothing but imprecise language, and use it, not as a basis for action, but to pacify environmental critics while continuing to follow the interest-group politics which lead to growth.

For example, Labor's population policy could conceivably lead to a larger migrant intake. In a recent interview with *The Australia/Israel Review*, Beazley was asked about his response to calls from the business community for a higher intake. He claimed that the Labor Government had reduced the intake, pointing to the contrast between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

There's no doubt at all that the housing industry enjoyed its best years when we were operating the policies that we did in the 1980s and that we trailed off.

I mean, we cut back the migration program. It might suit me in some circumstances to say that Howard did, but one needs to be honest about these things, we did. And we did basically at the time, not with an eye to the housing industry, but with an eye to the very, very high unemployment rates amongst people, in particular of non-English speaking background.

Before I would increase substantially any of the migration programs, I would want to test the employment issue. ... Give them [new entrants to Australia] the maximum possible opportunity to participate in the workforce and see where that took us. So all the resources we had, we would put into job seeking for the new migrants coming to this country. I'd want to see

really quite high levels of success in entry into the employment market.⁷

The Australia/Israel Review then asked whether at 'the very minimum in Government he would maintain current immigration levels'. Beazley replied, "Oh, yes", adding that the ALP would also increase the family reunion component'.⁸ This sentiment could mean that a Labor Government would promote a larger program in order to accommodate more family reunion immigrants or, coupled with the population policy document which indicates a tougher attitude towards independent 'skilled' immigration (see above), it could simply mean a re-focussing of the intake within the existing numbers. (It is interesting that the population policy speaks of an 'aged parent scheme'. If this means that a Labor Government would not re-open a point of entry for working-age parents this would imply a reduction in their previous concern to accommodate the interests of the family reunion lobby.)

Does the Coalition's absence of an explicit population policy mask an implied preference for fewer people or for more? The Prime Minister was also interviewed by *The Australia/Israel Review*. He said little to indicate any preference for any particular population size or migrant intake but, as he is the leader of the Government, it is reasonable to suppose that current policy represents his preference. John Howard did, however, argue that the Australian people had to accept immigration policy or at least 'be taken along' with it, and he disputed the charge that critics of immigration were racist.

Howard also showed support for the concept of multiculturalism in as much as it stood for community harmony and tolerance but went on to qualify this. He said that he believed that some

Australians were offended by particular connotations of multiculturalism by, for example, the idea:

that somehow or other we had no cultural identity until (we had) mass migration ... that we didn't really have an identifiable character until this came on to the scene. ...

If the word is used to describe the success of cultural and racial harmony in Australia, then I am all for it, and I don't think there are any limits to it. But if the word is meant to imply that the one great national cement of Australia is multiculturalism, then I think that is asking too much.⁹

These sentiments about multiculturalism are relevant to the immigration program. Previous administrations have justified an emphasis on family reunion in terms of the need to preserve and enhance their commitment to an image of Australia as a multicultural society. Attitudes to multiculturalism, in its guise as cultural maintenance and the goal of preserving distinct cultural groupings in Australia over the long term, have separated the Howard Government from its immediate Labor predecessors. Should a commitment to structural multiculturalism be strongly articulated by the opposition, we might well anticipate a resurgence of growth-oriented immigration policies with a Labor Government.

It is possible that neither side of politics cares particularly deeply about demography and its environmental implications. Population projections are for the future. More immediate concerns preoccupy the present. Contrasting attitudes towards the nature of the Australian identity and its origins may in fact separate the two sides of politics more sharply than the question of numbers. Beazley's view of his nation, its origins and future, has different nuances compared to Howard's. In Beazley's words:

As Australia has progressed through the political junctions of what has been nearly a century of life as a nation, we have steadily redefined our national identity towards that of a multicultural, racially egalitarian people, from some inauspicious beginnings. ...

... Australia has (since the mid 1960s) steadily demonstrated to the nations of our region—to our neighbours—that our national identity does not exclude them. We have steadily worn down the image of a cosseted, protected, insular white nation which only wishes it could be in the North Atlantic. We have shown that people from all over the world are welcome as Australians. This underpins all our relations with our neighbours with a concrete demonstration of our belief in their equality with us, and the fundamental egalitarianism of Australian society.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Many Australian conservationists and scientists are concerned about the demographic future of their country. Their focus is on the numbers and they are thinking for the long term. The politicians, and perhaps many of the voters, may think the numbers are a secondary issue. They may be confused by them and have little understanding of what they are or what they mean. Voters and politicians are more likely to feel that they understand the question of the Australian identity, and to respond to political messages about whether this identity should or should not be considered as source of pride. Environmentalists will have their work cut out to persuade the people and their leaders to maintain a clear focus on the next half century and the overall trajectory of the country's future.

Notes

¹ See vol. 5, no. 2, 1997.

² D. Kerr, 'The Australian Labor Party's views on

population policy', *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, pp. 13-14 (The current Shadow Minister is Martin Ferguson.)

³ P. Ruddock, 'Coalition Government views on population policy', *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, p. 8

⁴ ALP Platform as adopted at the 41st National Conference in Hobart from 19 to 22 January 1998. Point 3 (of 16 points): Developing Australia's Human Resources: Education, Training and Population Policy. Source: <http://www.alp.org.au/platform/chap3.htm>, downloaded 4/6/98

⁵ Media Release, MPS 36/98, 8 April 1998

⁶ See ABS, *Projections of the Populations of Australia, States and Territories: 1995-2051*, Catalogue no. 3222.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1996

⁷ Kim Beazley, quoted in M. Kapel and D. Greason, 'Beazley at the crease', *The Australia/Israel Review*, vol. 23, no. 6 (25 May - 15 June), 1998, p. 9

* *ibid.*

⁹ John Howard, quoted in M. Kapel and D. Greason, 'Howard pads up', *The Australia/Israel Review*, vol. 23, no. 5 (1-24 May), 1998, pp. 12-13

¹⁰ Beazley, 'The sound of one hand clapping', *The Australia/Israel Review*, vol. 23, no. 6 (25 May - 15 June), 1998, p. 11. Beazley expressed exasperation during his interview that Howard was not helping him and the ALP to keep Pauline Hanson's One Nation party sidelined. He likened Labor's attempts to keep it marginalised to 'the sound of one hand clapping'. After his interview was completed (on 21 April) the situation with One Nation had developed further and he submitted this short essay to the *Review* which expressed his view of the country's identity in the course of developing his case against One Nation.