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Pronatalism, the media, and demographic fallacies

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[Editor's note: Mark O'Connor was unable to provide a written version of his paper in time for this CD. He has offered in lieu a version of his paper written for the press.]

Mark O'Connor, Time for a population policy

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has long denied that Australia needs a population policy. Yet this month he used the national demographers' conference in Melbourne to unveil what sounds remarkably like one.

Ruddock's speech was titled "A Sustainable Population for Australia". The environment was not his concern. By a "sustainable" population, it emerged, he meant a "maintainable" one. In short he is advocating a population which in the short term will continue to grow quite rapidly, and which in the long term (30-50 years from now) will slow and may eventually peak, but will never slip back.

What may have changed the political situation, and certainly the media's awareness, is a change of personnel at the nation's leading centre for demography, the ANU's Institute of Advanced Studies. Two of its most senior members, Lincoln Day and Christabel Young, recognised significant problems in Australia's rapid population growth. (We are adding a million people every 4-5 years, currently about half from natural increase, half from immigration). Their research underpinned the Australian Academy of Science's 1994 call for less immigration and a new emphasis on contraception.

Lincoln Day's book *The Future of Low Birth Populations* analyses the recent scare-claims about aging and declining populations, and finds little substance in them. But since Young's and Day's recent retirements, the media has paid much more attention to the significantly different emphasis of their colleague Professor Peter Macdonald.

I should emphasise that there is professional respect between all these demographers, and they do not question each other's mathematics. Nor have the demographic realities changed significantly. The main difference is that McDonald, who is also an economist, has introduced an assumption that has little to do with demography but which sits very well with business lobbyists and with government thinking. He assumes we might allow our population to stabilise but never to grow smaller. From there, it is a simple step for a demographer to show that any measures sufficiently vigorous to quickly arrest population growth might cause our population to peak and then decline.

Ruddock, one of the present government's most intelligent and numerate Ministers, wrapped his recent speech around repeated citation and praise of McDonald's views. Both men believe Australia has finally found the right size of immigration intake. At most other politically-feasible sizes, they say, population would peak and then fall away.

Yet McDonald's views seem an odd mix of demography and growth economics. At the recent demographers' conference he argued at length that the economic future will belong to those countries that resist population decline and maintain their labor supply. Some find this view old-fashioned in a world of computers and robotic automation. Indeed our

current struggle seems to be to spread a diminishing amount of work equitably among an excess of would-be workers.

The Stanford demographer and economist Meredith Burke predicts the reverse: that falling populations will be an economic advantage. She also repudiates McDonald's belief that population size must only be allowed to move up, and never down - like a highway that has only uphill, not downhill stretches. This would imply, she says, "a demographic perpetual motion machine". Meanwhile environmentalists insist that population-growth should end quickly, since the present population is already doing unacceptable damage.

Crucial to McDonald's (and Ruddock's) position is the claim that we must tolerate rapid growth at present for fear of sending our population into a future decline. Otherwise, McDonald fears, the birthrate might one day fall so low that immigration cannot make up the shortfall. Though there would be plenty of willing immigrants, we would be unable to use them, because the immigration rate required would exceed that which in recent years has been politically possible.

This seems a confused scenario. It is true that Gallop polls show an overwhelming belief that immigration is too high, with some showing as few as 2% of Australians wanting to see immigration increased. (Presumably most of these 2% work for the media!) Clearly not even immigrant Australians approve of current levels of immigration. Yet the same polls show warm attitudes to refugees, to multiculturalism and to immigrant cultures - much warmer than back in the post-WWII days when, however, we overwhelmingly supported far higher per capita levels of immigration.

The public's change of view need not mystify us. Urban Australians notice every day as they drive to work that our big cities already have more than enough people. (Sydney may be heading for 6 million people).

If that ever ceases to be our urban reality - or when someone invents the long-sought policy that will cause immigrants and residents alike to move to the farming areas - this opposition to migration will dwindle. (Birthrates, too, may rebound). But to go on pushing people into the country at a rate the electorate thinks is excessive, because we don't believe the electorate is smart enough to change its mind if circumstances change, is dubious policy.

Let's be realistic. Australia currently has twice as many births per year as deaths, and births will exceed deaths for the next 30 years. Further, the world has a vast surplus of people. In an age of immigration we are not going to 'run out of people'. The real risk for Australia remains not under- but over-population.