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Projecting Population Milestone Events: Balancing Celebration and Science

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Over recent years, Australia and several states have reached important population milestone events. Australia reached 20 million in December 2003, Victoria 5 million in December 2004, Western Australia 2 million in January 2005 and Queensland 4 million in December 2005. In the lead up to these events official demographers and statisticians were asked to predict the date on which the population event was achieved so as to inform the community and celebrate the event. However, media and other expectations seek higher levels of precision, and express disappointment when they cannot pick an actual time and hospital in which to welcome the xth member of the population. There is a contradiction in this quest. Usually demographers are asked to project the population over years, rather than forecast, with precision, the day and time a particular milestone will be achieved. The paper outlines some of the simple methods used in projecting such milestone population events using recent examples and discusses some of the challenges, assumptions and limitations. The paper concludes with recommendations for future events.