

POPULATION POLICY: ELEMENTS OF A BIPARTISAN APPROACH

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This paper examines the similarities and differences between the approaches to population matters of the major political parties in Australia. Of particular interest are the prospects for a bipartisan approach to population policy and its possible characteristics. The paper argues that there are important similarities between the major parties in relation to demographic goals and concerns. Their positions on population matters also have little in common with those of most of the organizations and individuals who have been conspicuous in advocating the adoption of a population policy since the 1970s. While the government rejects the concept of a population policy as too narrow and limiting, its approach to the management of aspects of demographic change is consistent with the opposition's more holistic concept of a population policy. Development of a bipartisan position will need to entail acceptance of a broad-based concept and the statement of demographic goals in public policy generally.

No Australian government has supported an active population policy since the abolition, in the early 1970s, of the '2 per cent target' for national population growth. Few, if any, more developed countries have a declared 'population policy'. Nevertheless, low birth rates, and the resulting prospect of population decline and excessive ageing, are compelling reasons for seeking to modify the present direction of population changes in such countries, and some now have policies to maintain or raise their fertility (Jones 1997:1–2; Hugo 1999:28). Any active intervention into the course of population change amounts to a population policy, whether or not it is described as such. A population policy refers to 'all deliberate government actions intended to influence population growth, size, distribution and composition' (after Eldridge 1968:381).

In thirty years of debate on population policy in Australia, most advocates have seen changes to immigration as the principal means of policy implementation, but their views have never gained much acceptance and, in the present political climate, are unlikely to do so. Both the government and the opposition are more concerned, at least in principle, with the management of an array of population changes, and do not regard changes to immigration as the only policy instrument for influencing population trends. The demographic dimension of public policy today is concerned with a range of interrelated changes. It entails responding to varied demographic developments, maximizing opportunities and avoiding

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unfavourable outcomes. Population distribution, ageing and fertility are becoming important demographic considerations alongside immigration.

With the recent and important entry, in 1998, of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) into the ranks of those advocating a population policy for Australia (Betts 1998:6), viewpoints are shifting from the long-standing emphasis on the environment to a wider-ranging perspective on the relevance of population in public administration. It is notable that the ALP's position on population policy has little in common with the goals of most of the organizations and individuals that have advocated the adoption of a population policy since the 1970s.

It is also significant that there are marked similarities between the approaches of the present government and the opposition to population matters. This includes their joint rejection of a population policy as a basis for addressing environmental concerns. The present Coalition government (Liberal and National) maintains that a population policy is unnecessary, but this seems to be mainly because they consider narrowly conceived concepts of a population policy to be unworkable. The government's activities certainly include 'deliberate actions to influence population growth, size, distribution and composition'.

A relevant question for the start of the new century is whether existing similarities between the major parties regarding population matters represent an emerging basis for a new bipartisan approach. Policies that seek to modify demographic trends will be of particular benefit to Australia if there is bipartisan support for a consistent approach through many years. While there are also short-term benefits, such as better predictability in planning (Jones 1997; Rowland 1997, 1998), greater potential advantages arise from cumulative outcomes. Australia's first and only population policy, the '2 per cent target' growth rate, survived through fourteen government ministries as an agreed goal for population growth. Bipartisan support seems to have depended on a general perception that it was right for the time. The Chifley Labor government introduced the 2 per cent target after the Second World War to serve the goals of defence, industrialization and development; the Whitlam Labor government abolished it when rapid growth was no longer tenable. This paper examines the similarities and differences between the approaches of the major parties to population matters. Of particular interest are the prospects for a bipartisan approach and its possible characteristics.

Comparing goals

The ALP supports the notion of a population policy as an instrument for promoting 'national self-reliance' (Beazley 1999). This goal seems not at all at odds with the government's goal in relation to population matters, of 'an economically and socially vibrant Australia that is sustainable into the future' (Ruddock 1999:11). Labor argues that a larger population will bring varied benefits, including contributing to higher economic growth (Beazley 1999:2), strengthening declining regions and making Australia more secure, especially in the north. These have parallels in a number of goals in nation building over Australia's history, including a belief in linkages between population growth and economic growth, population size and international influence, and human numbers and defence capability. Each of these has been, and continues to be, a matter of debate, although in a changing context that introduces new considerations.

Defence

Defence is a case in point. A recurring theme in national development has been developing and populating the tropical north of Australia. In the mid-1960s, Davidson (1965) refuted ideas about the agricultural development potential of the north in his book *The Northern Myth*, arguing that investments were better made in other areas closer to domestic markets. Recent evidence of new priorities, however, comprises the establishment of military bases in northern Australia, the growing recognition of Darwin as a link with Asia, and the revival of previous proposals to build a Darwin to Alice Springs railway. According to opposition leader, Kim Beazley (1999), 'the relative under-population of our north is not a sustainable prospect when it comes to defending this nation'. Beazley (1999) has also stated that 'one of the most troubling aspects of an ageing population is the declining population base fit for military service'. Labor now envisages a population policy contributing to populating the north and providing a sufficient population base nationally to support a larger defence force. The defence argument has been disputed repeatedly over time (Birrell and Rowland 1988:7; Cocks 1996:186), and neither defence nor northern development is a priority concern in the government's statements on population matters.

Economic benefits

Yet like Labor, the government sees immigration as a means of benefiting the economy; it encourages forms of migration that are particularly relevant in this respect. The renewed emphasis on permanent migration of people with skills and capital, together with temporary migration of skilled people, reflects a belief in economic benefits from certain forms of migration, but not from population growth generally. Labor seems to support a larger population as economically beneficial in itself. Although there is no clear link between population growth and growth of GDP (Gregory, cited by Ruddock 1999:11), growth from selective immigration has decided benefits (Withers 1999). The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs argues that a greater intake could require reduction in selection standards and an increase in the numbers of unskilled workers, who are generally a major cost to the commonwealth budget. The additional migrants would be older, less skilled or less fluent in English and less employable (Ruddock 1999:8). Thus both the government and the opposition support population growth through immigration for economic reasons, but the government's approach is currently more targeted.

Population enhancement

'Population enhancement' is also a component of both Labor's population policy and the government's population-related initiatives. According to Beazley (1999:6): 'The more you think about population policy, the more you keep coming back to the need for a focus on public investment in human capital.' This would entail education, training and labour market investments. These concerns are largely outside the portfolio of the minister currently responsible for population issues, and receive little mention in his comments on population policy. Indeed one of the arguments against a population policy is that demographic matters have long been central to the work of government agencies, and no special new arrangements are necessary. In reply, Jones (1997:24–25) has noted that 'The total efforts of the various government agencies deal reasonably well with *adapting* to population trends. But they

certainly do not add up to an adequate coordinated effort to assess whether population trends are desirable and to *modify* those that are not'.

Nevertheless, 'family friendly' policies, or 'indirect pro-natalist policies' (Hugo 1999:32), are common to both the opposition's and the government's statements on population matters, albeit that some see them as stronger on rhetoric than substance. These policies are promoted as seeking to support equal opportunity and freedom of choice in family formation and childrearing (Ferguson 1999:2-3; Ruddock 1999:11). The ALP has specified a range of policies 'to arrest the decline in birth rates', including affordable child care and work practices supportive of people with families (Ferguson 1999:3). Yet countering family-friendliness in some areas are 'unfriendly' policies in others. An example is the present Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), which originated as a former Labor government initiative (see paper by Jackson in this volume). This 'student tax' disadvantages the young, especially those without parents able to finance their tertiary education 'up front'. 'User pays' in tertiary education burdens people from less affluent backgrounds with extra indebtedness during a time when they are seeking to establish their own households. Its role in lowering fertility remains to be conclusively demonstrated, but the lower fertility of the tertiary educated may now be more than a matter of lifestyle choice and greater ability to avoid unplanned births. It may also be a matter of indebtedness, together with the difficulties for women of combining family and career responsibilities (Hugo 1999:33).

Present concepts of a population policy

There are major similarities on both sides of politics in goals relating to population, but only Labor is currently including them in what it terms a population policy. This reflects that Labor has a different concept of population policy; one that is wide ranging, with multiple purposes. Thus, according to the Shadow Minister for Regional Development, Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Services and Population, Labor advocates

a 'whole of government' approach that will allow Australia to develop and grow – in a way that is sustainable. Labor's approach will combine the right mix of immigration and family policies that can help boost our population through natural increase as well as through immigration (Ferguson 1999:1).

In the minds of some, 'population policy' evokes images of repressive governments and infringement of human rights (see Ruddock 1998:43). Such associations are not prominent in Australia, however, where population policy has been linked mostly with ideas about immigration and conservation. The Coalition government's main reasons for eschewing population policy include a rejection of three narrow, but different, conceptions of what a population policy is.

First, a population policy that specifies a particular level of immigration is rejected. Ruddock (1998) has described many calls for a population policy as 'code of a particular view on the size and composition of the immigration intake.' Population policies defined in terms of immigration levels characterize most of the proposals from conservationists. Population policy founded entirely on immigration policy is very limited, even though immigration is the most obvious component of population change amenable to government decisions. In addition to

migration, population considerations in policy making include fertility and mortality levels, population distribution, age structure and other matters.

Second, a population policy that specifies a long-range target population is rejected. Arthur Calwell, Australia's first Minister for Immigration, once envisaged a target population of 20 million for Australia, and others have suggested much higher targets, of 50 million (Malcolm Fraser) or 100 million (Phil Ruthven), as beneficial economically or politically. If a long-range target population is simply an off-the-cuff opinion as to the desirable population for Australia at some unspecified time in the future, it has little relevance to population policy. Even if the target is posed as a goal to be achieved fifty years hence, its relevance to population policy is still doubtful: acceptance of such a target would imply that the forces of change are either predictable or fully controllable in the long term. A lesson from the history of population projections is that the future is not what it used to be: 'projection is such a treacherous area that policy-makers would be well advised to keep their options open' (Caldwell 1985:18). The government has rejected high targets because they would require unsupportable levels of immigration. It has also rejected lower targets either as equally unrealistic or as committing present and future governments to an unswerving goal with no latitude to respond to changing conditions (Ruddock 1999:8). Policy makers need to be informed about possible long-range outcomes, but targets are unrealistic. The preferable alternative, in the context of uncertainty about future changes, is to ensure that current developments are at least sustainable in the long term.

Third, a population policy that is a means of addressing environmental concerns is rejected. This view envisages population policy as focusing on a single issue, whereas population changes actually affect a wide range of developments in relation to the environment, the economy and society. In rejecting a population policy with a specific focus on the environment, the government has argued that 'today's policies and practices towards the environment are much more sensitive than in the past', and that the slowing of population growth 'should lessen negative impacts on the environment' (Ruddock 1998:2-3). The Shadow Minister for Population referred to findings of the 1994 Jones Report to the effect that 'environmental impact was a function not just of population, but also of technology, life-style and organisation' (Ferguson 1999:4). The Leader of the Opposition was somewhat less cautious on this issue, noting that while there are serious environmental issues to address as part of population policy, 'there is no fundamental conflict between a higher Australian population, and the protection of our environment' (Beazley 1999:3). This is consistent with the view that targeted environmental management policies are more effective than immigration policies in addressing environmental concerns (Chisholm 1999:24). These statements, however, should not be taken to imply that research on the role of population in environmental change has produced a resolution in favour of relegating population to the factors of minor importance (see Demeny 1989:217-218; Cocks 1996:132-134; Betts 1998:40). In 1998, for example, the Australian Academy of Science established a Population and Environment Fund to foster multidisciplinary research in this area.

The government's rejection of immigration levels, population targets and environmental concerns as foci for a population policy is, perhaps ironically, evidence that a bipartisan approach to population management is possible. The experience of the past thirty years has demonstrated that a population policy will gain little

support if founded on a single controversial issue or on a belief that the future is knowable. Also, a population policy can be expressed in a straightforward manner – such as a ‘2 per cent growth rate’ – only if there is wide acceptance that a single demographic goal will serve a range of national objectives.

Demographic change is a driving force for change in the whole society. A population policy for contemporary Australia should recognize the varied impacts of demographic changes. It also needs to be integrated with other aspects of policy making. The next section examines the stances of the main parties on major aspects of population change.

Dimensions of population change

Growth

Both parties support a larger population, beyond that which is possible from natural increase. They differ, however, on the size of the discretionary component of future growth. The government supports moderate growth, while the ALP currently envisages higher limits. Beazley (1999:3) has said that

Labor will establish an Office of Population to advise government on the optimal population mid-way through the 21st century, but looking to the ‘higher end’ of the estimates. The best approach to achieving a higher population looks both to immigration and family-friendly policies to boost the national birth rate.

The term ‘optimum population’ appears in Labor’s statements on population policy, but is bound to be a source of confusion, as it has been in the past. Little ground for agreement has been found after decades of discussion of the concept of an optimum population. General definitions based on quality of life (Jones 1994) or ecological sustainability (Singer 1971) are too general to implement. More specific demographic definitions are too narrow in scope. For instance, a low-mortality population is taken for granted as desirable, but does not address other issues such as population distribution. A low growth rate faces similar problems as a defining criterion of an optimum situation, as well as the objections that some see negative growth or a high growth rate as preferable to low growth. A stationary, or zero growth, population has been one of the more popular demographic definitions of an optimum population, but it raises questions about when the stationary state should occur and whether it will actually bring economic and social benefits.

While rejecting target populations, for reasons discussed earlier, Ruddock (1998:8) has made frequent reference to the notion that current immigration policy settings, in conjunction with plausible assumptions about birth and death rates, could lead to a stabilization of numbers around mid-century. Presumably, the government sees this as a desirable potential outcome. There is no mention that stabilization will define an optimum population, only the implication that it would be acceptable in the long run. In discussions of future population numbers in Australia, the concepts of an optimum population or a target population are better replaced by the notion of an acceptable course into the future. This entails avoiding directions with unwanted outcomes, but does not entail a commitment to maintaining a particular direction if circumstances change.

Guiding population growth along a particular path is compatible with the

notion of a population policy: the government's choice of 'policy settings', compatible with an acceptable long-run outcome, entails management of the process of growth. Two key issues arise here. First, how long will the stated trajectory be maintained? If for only a few years it would scarcely amount to a trajectory. Second, have the outcomes of the policy settings actually aligned with the stated trajectory during the first and second Coalition ministries?

Overall population growth rates have varied within a relatively narrow range since the Coalition first took office in March 1996. This contrasts with marked fluctuations in the growth rate during the 1980s, largely due to changes in net migration (Jones 1997:4). As yet there has been insufficient time for a trend to emerge, but there is at least now a more considered approach to population growth than in the past. Nonetheless, the variability of net migration over the life of the present government is a continuing source of uncertainty. The principle of steering growth in a particular direction is consistent with the notion of a population policy, but actual experience still leaves open a wider range of futures.

Either there is no firm commitment to a particular trajectory for population growth, or overall net migration cannot be managed very well because of unpredictable changes in components such as trans-Tasman migration and movement of the Australia-born (Betts 1998:38). Greater constancy in net permanent and long-term migration would be possible only if the planned intake for the current year was adjusted in the light of the previous year's net total. Changes in fertility, and to a lesser extent mortality, inevitably add to uncertainty in the long run.

At this stage, the ALP has not sought to define the 'policy settings' that would take Australia towards the relatively high-growth future they envisage, although their proposals refer to longer-term, rather than year-by-year, planning of immigration (Betts 1998:37). There is a strong possibility that their goals would require continuous expansion of the immigration intake beyond previous record levels, unless family-friendly policies, or social change, reverse the fall of the birth rate.

Distribution

Where the extra millions added to the population will live is a further question for population policy, or at least for public policy that takes more than a reactive approach to population trends. A population of 23 million by 2050, which the government perceives as acceptable (Betts 1998:38; Ruddock 1998:44), and which Kippen and McDonald (1998:12) have described as 'Australia's implicit population policy', has different implications for the nature of the society, the economy and the environment depending on where the extra millions will live.

The government sees the fostering of population growth to reinvigorate declining areas as desirable. Ruddock (1999:9) noted that a better dispersal of the immigration intake could contribute to this, but only if states such as Tasmania and South Australia have sustainable economic and employment growth in the first place. The minister noted also that better dispersal of the intake would help to reduce population-induced pressures in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. He said, 'we are actively seeking a partnership with business and the states on this important issue' (Ruddock 1999:8). Yet, while noting that the mechanisms for dispersal are underutilized and that 'we must continue to address this' (Ruddock 1999:6), the minister has also said that there is a 'very limited range of policy levers that governments have available to influence population size and distribution' (Ruddock

1998:43). Substantial public and private investment will be prerequisites for progress in this area, but it is nevertheless notable that the government regards it as 'desirable' to influence population distribution: a true population policy objective.

Regional development is more prominent in the ALP's position on population policy, which sees immigration as a means to revitalize state and regional economies, as well as to populate the north (Ferguson 1999:3–4; Beazley 1999:3). This would be achieved, for example, through encouraging new arrivals to move to specific areas, such as through awarding additional points in their migration test, but the opposition also acknowledges that employment opportunities need to be created at the same time.

Throughout its history, Australia has had only limited success in sponsoring economic and population growth beyond economic core regions, Canberra being the most notable exception. In diverting migrants to less traditional areas of settlement, the long-standing obstacles persist, especially lack of social support networks, lack of infrastructure, lack of jobs and distance from markets. Immigrants will also need incentives to stay in appointed destinations, rather than merely using them as stepping stones to Sydney or elsewhere. Temporary entry visas, tied to employment in regional areas, are one means of directing immigrants to selected locations, but in the long run positive incentives, such as housing assistance, are needed to retain them. The 'regional sponsored migration scheme', which operates in the former way, has had only a minor impact on the distribution of the total intake (see paper by Khoo in this volume).

Composition

Seeking, through immigration, to alter the composition of new additions to the labour force is a further defining characteristic of an active population policy that manages population change to achieve desired outcomes. Usually, interventions such as the current emphasis on economically beneficial migration (including the temporary entry of skilled workers) are regarded as part of employment policy or immigration policy. However, a more integrated view of demographic changes and directions in society would come from recognizing that labour force interventions are part of a wide range of activities that actively modify population trends.

A focus on persons of labour force age is typical in immigration policy, but the population-related activities and concerns of government also extend to the younger and older groups in the age structure. In the past these have taken the form of population-responsive policies to meet the present or projected needs of children and the aged. There is now good reason for governments to take an active role in influencing developments in these age groups. The maintenance of below-replacement fertility foreshadows a situation where deaths will eventually exceed births, and the aged will outnumber children. The prospects of population decline and an excessive level of ageing could both be addressed through seeking to maintain or increase the birth rate.

Compared with the 1890s and the 1930s, the current phase of fertility decline, beginning in the mid-1970s, has evoked relatively little public concern. It accords with the acceptability of low population growth rates, and seems consistent with supporting freedom of choice in reproduction. However, this does not mean that constraints on family formation are adequately addressed. Low fertility and childlessness are not necessarily voluntary outcomes in the pursuit of individual self-ful-

filment. Very low fertility is a particular concern because it raises the long-run prospect of hyper-ageing. This is an excessive degree of ageing associated with below-replacement fertility, negative population momentum and population decline.

Both the government and the opposition support family-friendly policies, and both seek to address concerns arising from the ageing of the population. A focus on the birth rate would provide a means of addressing important aspects of both issues, and would mesh with the notion of seeking to advantage Australia's development through modifying demographic processes. There is a precedent for this in long-standing interventions to reduce national age-specific death rates, as well as those of Aborigines and other high-risk groups. Although such interventions are never described as part of a population policy, they have equivalent goals in that they modify population trends.

As a dimension of population policy, population composition is not limited to questions concerning the age composition of the population or the occupational composition of the labour force. The notion of 'a diverse population enriching quality of life for all and strengthening ties with the rest of the world' (Beazley 1999) has long been one of the reasons for bipartisan support for an immigration intake from many different origins. An ever-present goal in population building in Australia has been to maintain social cohesion through control over the ethnic composition of the immigrant intake. The postwar experiment of diversifying the national origins of the immigration flow showed that social cohesion need not be founded on ethnic homogeneity or assimilation, but is possible in an ethnically mixed and more cosmopolitan society whose members have in common an identification with Australia. Monitoring of the changing ethnic composition and allegiances of the population has been an important part of the government's population-related concerns; diversification has only been allowed to occur in the light of previous experience. Australia's 'truly remarkable social experiment' in transforming the ethnic composition of immigration since 1945 also coincides with active population policy, in that it has amounted to a conscious modification of the ethnic composition of the population.

Discussion

Arguments that to formulate a population policy for Australia is impossible refer to the divisions between the states on matters such as immigration and population growth, together with the difficulties of finding a common demographic goal compatible with the diverse responsibilities of different government departments. This notion, however, seems to arise from the belief that a population policy is necessarily reducible to a concise principle or goal, such as might be stated in simple terms regarding population growth, immigration or a target population.

Comparison of the approaches of the two parties to population matters reveals a common interest in broader objectives. This comparison by no means covers the full range of opinion on population policy in Australia, but it does illustrate what is, or could soon become, acceptable to governments. The similarities between the two approaches are striking, even though only one of them is described as a population policy.

The position of the Coalition government is that population is a consideration in

policy making, but there is no need for a specific population policy. Yet several features of its position almost amount to population policy, since they entail 'policy settings' or general principles conducive to particular demographic outcomes. These are: low growth to minimize environmental impacts; dispersal of growth to regional areas; family-friendly policies supportive of the birth rate; and immigration to achieve particular outcomes for the labour force, social cohesion and other purposes. The government has not seen any reason to call this a 'population policy' because the aims are diverse and the outcomes varied. Population considerations are integrated into social, economic and environmental policy rather than separated out as an end in themselves. The aims of the ALP's holistic approach to population policy have broad similarities with the aims of the government on population matters, but their proposed demographic interventions are more conspicuous because they are described as 'population policy'.

If there is any basis of a bipartisan approach to population matters it presumably resides in these similarities. The common ground for the major parties has been emerging through several developments. First, there has been a shift from an emphasis on population-responsive concerns to recognizing that there are additional benefits to be derived from initiating certain demographic changes. Second, there has been a further shift from narrowly conceived to more holistic population policy. Third, the view that saw population policy as a separate area of concern has been replaced by a perspective that sees population as closely integrated with varied areas of public policy making. And finally, previously fragmented policies have been replaced by a more co-ordinated approach that recognizes both the responsive and the pro-active demographic elements relevant to a range of public policies.

Further emphasis on the third and fourth of these developments could lead to setting aside the notion of a highly focused population policy, and replacing it with a more general concept of a population policy serving a range of purposes and including both responsive and pro-active initiatives. Arthur Calwell's (1945) original ideas for his 'populate or perish' policy were quite close to this, but over time they became reduced to a few slogans, especially the narrow emphasis on 'the 2 per cent target'. The ALP's current more comprehensive approach to population policy goes well beyond the limited scope of other recent proposals for such a policy, as does the government's handling of population considerations in what almost amounts to a wide-ranging *de facto* population policy.

Nevertheless, a bipartisan approach to population management will need to differ from current approaches if it is to outlive individual governments and not simply be rhetoric to appeal to sections of the electorate. Important here will be the statement of demographic goals in public policy generally, such as low mortality; low morbidity; fertility close to replacement; population enhancement through education and equal opportunity; greater predictability in planning; and maintenance of regional populations. Negatives to be avoided should also be identified, such as national population decline; excessive ageing; high levels of demographic dependency; and rapid growth of congested capital cities.

In conclusion, this paper argues that the areas of convergence in the approaches to population matters of the main political parties represent the beginnings of a viable basis for a broad-based, rather than narrowly conceived, national population policy. The main advantages of identifying a specific population policy are that it gives greater visibility to population concerns, and a greater assurance that they are

under consideration. Governments have taken refuge in the notion that population growth, population distribution and the birth rate are largely beyond the influence of policies. This contention needs further scrutiny. Development of a bipartisan approach will necessarily require further research on demographic trends and the effectiveness of strategies to avoid undesired consequences. It may also require moving responsibility for population policy issues from the immigration portfolio in order to break the long-standing perception of population policy as centring on immigration and having little to do with fertility and population distribution (see Ruddock 1998:45). Ongoing inquiry into the range of population changes affecting public policy might be obtained through the operation of an organization such as the ALP's proposed Office of Population (Ferguson 1999:1). Development and maintenance of a new national population policy will entail the process that Demeny (1989:241) described as 'an exploration of the demographic choices open to societies that aim not just to muddle through'.

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