

Some Points To Consider When Determining Future Population Policy In Australia

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Australia is a land of urban-conurbations not boundless plains

Forty percent of Australians live either in Melbourne or Sydney compared to only twenty percent of people who live in England's two main cities of London and Birmingham. Therefore our population growth (which translates to a new Sydney less than every 15 years) is far less evenly distributed than in many European countries who are served with a large network of established towns.

In Melbourne and Sydney especially, infrastructure and services are not coming anywhere close to keeping up with population growth, which is why the Victorian Liberal opposition leader, Matthew Guy has asked that there be a conversation about population growth and why the ex-premier of NSW, Bob Carr has stated that Sydney is growing too fast. There isn't the money available in the State coffers to pay for the necessary infrastructure to create long term sustainable communities at this rate of growth.

Urban Consolidation in its current format is not a solution for housing a fast growing population

On top of a growing infrastructure debt, Melbourne will require an additional 355,000 new homes in the next decade alone, just to keep up with demand. Many people advocate urban consolidation to cater to this need but so far in Melbourne at least, this approach has turned out to be a major exercise in greenwash, whereby very few high-density residential developments are even remotely affordable to people on lower incomes. Even fewer units are large enough to house families. A recent study by Bob Birrell and David McCloskey from The Australian Population Research Institute has highlighted that ninety percent of new apartment approvals in Melbourne are no greater than sixty square metres in size, mainly because they are aimed at investors. Without a strong component of affordable housing in place, urban consolidation adds to suburban sprawl because it forces more people on lower incomes to the urban fringe. Even with affordable housing provisions it would be unrealistic that most of Melbourne's 100,000 a year increase in population would be happy living in high-rise tenements in the inner suburbs which are already feeling the strain of increased demand for services.

We also need to be focussing on developing brownfield sites, increasing densities in the middle suburbs and establishing new urban villages on the railway line outside of the Metropolitan area in order to properly accommodate a doubling of Melbourne's population, but this takes time and it would require a slower rate of population growth. This is because good planning needs to be well considered and should take into account much more than the housing needs of its residents. To take one example, the proposed Fisherman's Bend development in Melbourne has been on the drawing board for a long period, yet upon completion, it will absorb less than one year's worth of Melbourne's current rate of population growth.

An alternative strategy (which is promoted by forward thinking planners such as Professor Michael Buxton) is to increase the density of middle suburbs that already contain a substantial amount of infrastructure and much of the post-war detached housing stock contained within them does not come anywhere close to the energy efficiency standards that would be required if they were built today. A substantial proportion of this stock could be replaced with dual or triple occupancy developments complete with access to private open space. This would be in contrast to the higher density alternatives that are being championed in the inner suburbs, where space is much more of a premium.

If we want to avoid the current situation whereby rapid population growth is leading to suburban sprawl and poor quality high density apartment living that is aimed at a narrow demographic, then we should slow population growth to enable a slower more resilient planning model. This would include:

1. Allowing existing post-war housing stock over time to be replaced with a greater proportion of medium density development in the middle suburbs.
2. Well considered, brownfield site developments that include precincts for economic activity.
3. New urban villages/regional towns which can become largely self contained but are also within

commutable distance of Melbourne and situated on the existing train line or an extended railway line.

4. A slower more considered rate of high- density residential development close to existing public transport which has higher design standards in place as well as a greater emphasis upon affordable housing development. The co-housing model is one example that should be more greatly encouraged.
5. Achieving this kind of planning outcome would better preserve our food bowl, biodiversity on the fringe and be respectful of the heritage value/village appeal of the inner suburbs.

Australia has an obligation?

Some would argue that despite our current poor planning models, Australia has an obligation to help ease the burden of heavily populated countries. This however becomes counterproductive if people are forced to increase their environmental footprint simply by virtue of moving here. With the improved planning outcomes that come with a slower rate of population growth, the carbon footprint per capita would reduce as we would reduce commuting time and food miles by protecting land on the fringe. By protecting our agricultural land from development and having fewer mouths to feed here, we would be in a better position to feed other countries who, due to high populations of their own, are reliant upon importing food.

Population policy should therefore be primarily focused on doing the most good for people who need the most help.

Refugees

Refugees are a small component of our annual intake and they have played and continue to play a major role in enriching our multicultural society. Ironically, due to large-scale migration aimed at boosting GDP, we are making it harder for incoming refugees to build meaningful communities, precisely because multicultural areas such as Footscray are in danger of becoming gentrified through high density apartment development. The savings in infrastructure that we would make by slowing non-refugee migration could free up more money to help refugees whilst also providing us with the opportunity to begin the process of catching up on our existing nationwide 200 billion dollar infrastructure debt.

Interestingly, the report by Bob Birrell and David McCloskey from The Australian Population Research Institute discusses how, as a result of the impact of current migration levels, migrants may eventually end up by-passing Australia altogether and that those who choose to stay will have to make adjustments to their lifestyle such as delaying starting a family. This is largely because refugees and other migrants on lower incomes will be forced to live in areas where there is a severe lack of services, either through massive demand in the inner suburbs or through the lack of access to services that accompanies suburban sprawl.

Conclusion

The current rate of population growth is compounding a number of problems. The first is that the speed of this increase is such that it reduces our ability to carry out slower, more considered town planning policy. This results in town planning outcomes which increase our collective carbon footprint. A rapid increase in population is also forcing more people into the outer suburbs through the gentrification that is being caused by high density development and this in turn threatens the viability of multicultural areas such as Footscray. Despite being a large country, Australia is less equipped to handle a rapid rate of population growth compared to many smaller countries because most people here tend to live in urban conurbations. This means that services and infrastructure are less evenly distributed in the regions and the area needed to absorb growth is considerably smaller.

Therefore it is essential that serious consideration be given to reducing non-refugee migration to the levels that they were in the early nineties.