

MEDICAL ASSOCIATION FOR PLANETARY SURVIVAL

(MAPS)

Submission dated

29 March 1999

to the

Productivity Commission

In connection with the Productivity Commission's inquiry into

Implementation of

Ecologically Sustainable Development

by

Commonwealth Departments and Agencies

Introduction

This submission is made as the result of the call from the Productivity Commission ('the Commission') for submissions from those interested in the Commission's inquiry into Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies.

This submission is made by the Medical Association for Planetary Survival, (MAPS), a small Brisbane-based organisation of medical graduates concerned by the rapidly increasing world population – that there are significant implications for health, nutrition, social order, economics and the environment.

POPULATION GROWTH AND THE WELFARE OF FUTURE AUSTRALIANS

MAPS notes below the opinions of the world's leading scientists concerning population size, the environment and ESD.

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"The World's Scientists' Warning to Humanity"¹. A Summary:

This warning was signed by over 1670 'Concerned Scientists' including 104 Nobel laureates - a majority of living recipients of the Prize in the sciences-representing 71 countries and all of the most populous nations. It was first signed in 1992, and reindorsed in September 1997².

These scientists have called for immediate action in order 'to avert disaster'.

In their statement the above eminent scientists warned:

We must accept limits to...[population] growth...The earth is finite. Its ability to provide for growing numbers of people is finite. Even at this moment, one person in five lives in absolute poverty without enough to eat. The earth's ability to absorb wastes and destructive effluent is finite. Its ability to provide food and energy is finite. ...we are fast approaching many of the earth's limits...(with) the risk that vital global systems will be damaged beyond repair...¹

It is appropriate to include the warning of Australia's medical graduate, Nobel laureate, the late Sir Macfarlane Burnet in his brilliant *Dominant Mammal*³, written as early as 1970:-

"As a human biologist...I am desperately alarmed at the current course of history...The human predicament, the whole fate of the species is more desperate now than it has ever been".

The Population Summit of the World's Scientific Academies:

Fifty-six of the world's scientific academies, including those of the USA, the UK and Australia met at New Delhi 24-27.10.93. The gathering's primary goal was the formulation of a statement to be presented at the International Commission on Population and Development to be held at Cairo in 1994: It was the first large-scale collaborative activity ever undertaken by the world's scientific academies. Representatives of sixty scientific academies signed a final Statement, published under the auspices of The Royal Society. Part of the Statement reads:

"Action is needed now. Humanity is approaching a crisis point with respect to population, environment and development...Scientists have the ...responsibility to mount a concerted effort to confront the human predicament...With each year's delay, the problems become more acute..."⁴

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MAPS HAS SELECTED TWO COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENTS

MAPS believes that at least two Commonwealth Departments, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Treasury should urgently take into account the above concerns of the world's best scientific opinion. MAPS does not suggest that those two departments are the only ones which should take note of the seriousness of Australia's situation today, but they will serve to illustrate the depth of the problems.

POPULATION GROWTH

By growing its population more rapidly per capita than any OECD country, with the possible exception of Canada, Australia is unsustainably reducing its natural resources of topsoil, fresh water, forests, fisheries, biodiversity and minerals. Australia is richer in minerals per capita than most nations, but the other five natural resources are all very much under threat. This is made clear by many eminent authorities^{5,6,7,8}, and is repeated in very recent publications by Australia's prestigious research organisation, the CSIRO, quoted by Professor Ian Lowe of Griffith University⁹: To quote from Professor Lowe's reviews of the CSIRO'S *Agriculture and the Environmental Imperative*, "...**current practice is far from sustainable**" while the CSIRO'S *Sustainable Agriculture* indicates that "...**things will become steadily worse.**"⁹

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has indicated that under present settings of natural increase and immigration, Australia is heading for a population of 27 million in 2051, almost a 50 percent increase in today's population. This means that the per capita reserve of natural resources of today's 19 million Australians will also fall by almost 50 percent.

BIODIVERSITY LOSS

Biodiversity loss is a key indicator of unsustainability. It is noted that Environment Minister Robert Hill has said

*The conservation of biodiversity underlies all environmental issues.*¹⁰

Australia's inaugural state of the environment report –*Australia: State of the Environment 1996*¹¹, described by Senator Hill as 'the most comprehensive report card ever prepared on our environment', identifies **biodiversity loss as being perhaps Australia's 'most serious environmental problem.'**¹⁰

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS

DIMA'S actions have a dramatic effect on ESD by its influencing the size of Australia's total human population, yet DIMA'S 1997-1998 Annual report has no mention of ESD. **This failure to incorporate ESD and environmental considerations into its decision-making processes so far is a very serious omission.**

The Jones' inquiry recommended that the Australian Government should adopt a population policy, establish a Cabinet Committee on Population chaired by the Prime Minister and separate responsibility for population and immigration.¹² This has not occurred, so de facto responsibility for population remains with DIMA.

DIMA is aware, or should be aware of the emerging view of many economists^{13,14} that Australia's pursuit of population growth is not enhancing the economic welfare of its citizens.

For as long as DIMA has the responsibility of population, it is vital that DIMA fully incorporates ESD principles in to every aspect of its work which affects population levels.

THE TREASURY

Unlike DIMA, Treasury's senior management has clearly expressed some of the general principles of ESD. For example Treasury's Annual Report says that

- in carrying out its Mission (to improve the wellbeing of the Australian people), Treasury has regard to the following objective: Promotion of ..**sustainable** use of resources (:p11, emphasis added)
- the following clause and principles govern Treasury's approach: Living standards should be assessed in the broadest way taking into account social, cultural and **environmental** values as well as material wealth (p14 emphasis added).

While these statements are welcome, Treasury has failed to apply these principles to its work – ie they remain statements of principle only.

Treasury's approach to economic growth is inimical to ESD, as explained below, firstly examining its approach to the Mortimer report –*Going for Growth*, and secondly ignoring the approach of such individuals as the late H.C. Coombs,¹⁵ eminent economist, Governor of the Reserve Bank for 19 years and adviser to seven Prime Ministers from Curtin, through Menzies to Whitlam.

- **The Mortimer Report *Going for Growth Business Programs for Investment, Innovation and Export*¹⁶**

This report was commissioned by the (then) Minister for Industry, Science and Tourism, the Hon John Moore and presented to Minister Moore on 30 June 1997.

The Review was to be comprehensive, across all relevant portfolios, looking at major government and societal objectives such as reducing unemployment.

The report's major recommendation was that the Commonwealth Government should set itself the target of doubling Australia's per capita income growth.

The Report drew a very important distinction between the **per capita** income growth and **total (aggregate)** economic activity.

The Review strongly believes Australia should target a growth rate **per head of population**. All focus currently is on **total growth**. By the latter measure, Australia's performance has been strong. **But this strong performance has been driven by high population growth. If our main goal is to reduce unemployment through wealth creation, we should focus on our growth per head of population.**

Sadly our per capita growth is low - relatively poor. The growth performance is artificially driven by high population growth – in turn driven by high immigration, the highest per capita immigration in the OECD, with the possible exception of Canada.

If we are interested in addressing unemployment, and of course, high unemployment is one of Australia's greatest problems, especially long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, the focus should be on **growth per capita**.

THE APPROACH OF DR H. C. COOMBS AND OTHERS

I see no escape from increasing scarcity of resources [stemming from their) reckless dissipation or from the difficulties this will create. Once the implications of the finite environment are fully recognised, one can imagine convulsive redistributions of people and the emergence of a desperate technology...the last frantic flowering of the technological civilisation.¹⁵

Australia's greatest biologist, Nobel laureate, the late Sir Macfarlane Burnet clearly supported this stance twenty-nine years ago:-

Perhaps the most important feature of the year 2000 will be the firm realisation that [humankind] must provide everything from its own resources, except for solar energy.³

The late Dr. John Farrands, physicist, Chief Defence Scientist for Prime Ministers Whitlam and Fraser:-

It is insane that all nations are committed to continuous economic growth... It is a matter of complete astonishment to me that popular movements...can focus on the ephemeral and trivial, ignoring the threats of population growth and economics. Economic growth combined with population growth cannot go

on for very long. War, famine, mass migrations could easily occur with no salvation in this apocalypse – we'll all be victims!¹⁷

The statements of these three eminent Australians and many others made some time ago are still pertinent, and fit very well with the statements of the world's eminent scientific bodies made between 1992 and 1997:^{1,2}

MAPS RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT TREASURY

Treasury is impeding progress toward ESD, by effectively encouraging population growth in order to maximise growth in the total size of the Australian economy. After all, satisfactory development occurs in some countries eg Sweden, Ireland and Switzerland, which have relatively small populations without population growth.

Treasury should refocus its efforts on **per capita growth** as strongly emphasised by the 1997 Mortimer inquiry. It should realise and accept the effects of its decisions not only on the economy of Australia, but also on ecologically sustainable development and all that it means to Australian resources and to the future of the Australian people.

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SUMMARY

MAPS warmly welcomes the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies.

MAPS has briefly examined the actions of only two Commonwealth Departments which are failing to implement ESD principles, but MAPS believes that all Commonwealth Departments should examine their policies in the light of the statements of the world's leading scientists.

Both DIMA and Treasury should urgently refocus their policies in order to progress toward ESD.

APPENDIX-IMPORTANT RELEVANT STATISTICS

Net overseas migration gain for 1997-98 was 106200

New Zealanders (Permanent settlers minus departures):- Add 9000 to the immigration program!

Natural increase (births minus deaths) was 120600: **“At present in Australia those couples who choose to have children are averaging over two children each. But luckily about one fifth of Australian couples choose not to have children. Hence the overall average per couple (or per woman) is around 1.8 children. I say that this is lucky because the ABS projects that with so called ‘replacement rate fertility’ (ie an average of two surviving children per couple) and with zero net migration (which is still a distant ideal), our population would still rise another**

3.9 million before peaking around the year 2040. This would be the equivalent of adding a second Sydney, with all its demands, to our population.”¹⁸

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