

## MELVILLE CONSERVATION GROUP

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### SUBMISSION ON THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION'S DRAFT REPORT OF THE INQUIRY INTO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BY COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENTS & AGENCIES

The Melville Conservation Group is an environment group in Perth, concerned with maintaining a healthy and safe built and natural environment for humans and other species locally and throughout Australia. This association congratulates the Productivity Commission for highlighting important environmental issues.

#### **Population Pressures and Ecologically Sustainable Development**

Members believe that environmentally sustainable development (ESD) in any nation will only be achieved with a stabilised population that does not overload the environment. ESD in Australia will not be possible, unless the growing population is contained and stabilised.

In financial, environmental and social terms further population growth and environmental damage of the Australian continent simply can no longer be afforded. The current environmental debt across all States is already too costly. There is absolutely no room now for complacency or mistakes, from the point of view in particular of residents of Western Australia and South Australia, the driest regions in a continent which is the most arid inhabited land on Earth. The dams around Perth are only one third full and the cleared inland wheatbelt is crippled with salinity.

Numerous scientists in this country have advocated a sustainable population for Australia which inevitably means a small population. Australia is a high-growth and high consumption country, unlike other developed nations, which have low population growth and high economic performance. Though it is argued that consumption may be reduced, if, how and when this may happen is uncertain (and slow), whereas population can be stabilised and reduced more quickly and less painfully (avoiding uncomfortable draconian measures). As Australia's environmental problems are extremely serious, reducing population growth is an urgent and preferable option, as such action will succeed faster than slow, uncertain consumption reduction or vague promises of technology, that may never eventuate.

**Rural environmental constraints:** Both the national and Western Australian State of the Environment reports give clear warnings of the need to conserve resources and repair the environmental damage in Australia. The nation's numerous environmental constraints add up to a land capable of a very low carrying capacity - over 90 per cent of Western Australia has a lower rainfall than Ethiopia (1992: Dr Graham

Chittleborough, *Shouldn't Our Grandchildren Know?*). Consequently, members believe stabilising population is necessary and urgent. It is therefore necessary for the Commonwealth Government to review policies and programs directly related to Australia's population growth. It is imperative that all government departments at all levels adopt environmentally sustainable decisions. There is an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment and Agenda 21 guidelines for local government, but competent ESD decisions are still not often being achieved. At local government level, in particular, disastrous environmental decisions are continuing to occur, as though both staff and elected members had no idea of this important concept.

The most significant negative impact on Australia's environment did NOT occur when there was a smaller population (*Native Vegetation Clearance, Habitat Loss and Biodiversity Decline* in a report by DEST's Biodiversity Unit). As much land has been cleared during the last 50 years since 1945, in just five decades of high immigration (boasted about by some who lack both vision and caution), as was cleared in the earlier 150 years. Australia's present larger population is clearing land at an unsustainable rate. For every one hectare replanted with native seedlings, five hectares of bush are being cleared. Australia is losing its wondrous mega-diversity due to the fastest extinction rate in the world, with half the known extinctions of the last 2000 years occurring during this century. It is doubtful if economic planners recognise the vital role of plants, animals and micro-organisms in human survival.

**Urban environmental constraints:** With the expansion of our cities due to population growth, fringe development has resulted in the loss of precious, scarce fertile land. Members consider that strict regulations should be in place to prevent the loss of this land to agriculture and permanent green belts should be maintained to prevent housing subdivisions. Most European cities remain small to medium-sized, guarding their surrounding farmland from irresponsible rezoning.

For instance, in Germany only three cities, Berlin, Munich and Hamburg, have a population exceeding one million, which indicates that there is no reason why Australia has to build mega-cities. France has only four mega-cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille and Lille). Australia enjoys the dubious honour that only two OECD countries (Mexico & Turkey) have a higher population growth rate. Birthrates in the OECD countries are much lower than Australia's. In addition, the latest ABS figures show that net overseas immigration surpassed the Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs' (DIMA) target, reaching 110,600 for year ending September 1998, when the Minister had proclaimed a target of 80,000, which DIMA claimed would be maintained in 1998-9. This is not a "relatively low level of immigration" as DIMA's submission claims and there has been no "significant reduction in immigration". DIMA's submission has provided distorted information to the Commission and apparently is a government department that cannot adhere to environmentally sustainable policies or targets, which has serious repercussions for all government departments.

Australia's urban population growth is strongly promoted by industries, many of which are environmentally unsustainable, particularly the housing industry which blatantly

campaigns for continuous immigration growth, in order to build housing subdivisions wall-to-wall around the coast, at great environmental and resulting financial cost to the community.

Australia needs to limit growth, to adopt a population and consumption policy, to limit the size of our cities, to stop destroying complex, dynamic ecosystems (close to tolerance limit) that sustain all species including us in unpredictable habitats, and include environmental and social costs of development decisions.

Local Government has made negligible progress (other than in a few Councils) in implementing *Agenda 21* ( M. Keating, 1993: *Agenda for Change: a plain language version of Agenda 21 and other Rio Agreements*). Australia is a signatory to this UN Earth Summit agreement in Rio and must be far more responsible in relation to planning decisions. Unfortunately, there has been a failure to identify community priorities and work with the community in many cases. As a result, the confidence of many Australians is undermined after experiencing the cynical public relations exercises that frequently pass for community consultation with many local councils. When the environment is at stake, this is dangerously demoralising, a consequence that cannot be afforded if we value a safe, hopeful and healthy community. Australians would like to feel proud of their environs and be confident that leaders showed some responsible vision for this country.

The vision of our members is that Australians will live within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems (Brundtland Commission 1987), with good quality of life and environmentally sustainable development in order to protect all species. Our members do not believe that present strategies can achieve this unless population growth is stabilised.

### **Stabilisation of Australia's Population Growth:**

Members are concerned about the adverse impact of Australia's huge ecological footprint, as a direct result of continuing population expansion. The loss of non-renewable resources, biodiversity loss and the degradation of our cities is too high a price to pay. Clearing more fragile, marginal land for agriculture, grazing and mining, destroying forests and bushland, wetlands and coastal areas in order to further overpopulate this dry country will only result in the eventual pauperisation of both present and future communities. It seems to us that this might occur sooner rather than later, unfortunately.

Australia's population is increased by more than 200,000 annually, by birthrate and by immigration equally (ABS data). This means that the population increases by more than two million every decade. Within only two decades Australia's population will reach 23 million, which is the optimum figure that the Academy of Science and the present federal government recommend for this country. No plans have been publicised to explain what happens then, when this target is reached. With the birthrate alone (& no immigration), Australia would reach this target in around four decades, before the middle of the next century.

Presumably, the birthrate and immigration would then have to cease immediately. It is surely preferable to reduce growth gradually, starting now, with firstly a moratorium on immigration that can be reassessed later, only after repairing Australia's environment. Given its arid environment, it is our view that Australia is overpopulated, and increasing population growth is not in the national interest. Australia cannot afford to be stereotyped as an eternal immigration destination, as the enormous cost of the immigration program (around \$26,000 per person) could better provide funds to reverse environmental damage.

More population means ultimately more environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity, more poverty, more disease and more violence, accompanied by increasingly draconian laws. In order to accommodate population growth, the urban human habitat has been degraded by growing pollution, urban sprawl with poor transport systems and excessive levels of infill cramped housing. Only a small population in Australia can hope to enjoy good health and safety, with a good quality of life. Residents are currently experiencing the adverse impact of population growth on amenity and restrictions in access to clean resources eg energy, water and urban space etc. Already, as a result, there are increasingly grave risks to the physical and mental health of this and future generations, as quality of life continues to diminish.

Members believe it is time to pause now in order to repair the current levels of environmental damage and to avoid any further degradation. Population growth needs to be stabilised now, in order to avoid uncomfortable draconian controls looming for future generations. New South Wales has rightly taken a stand on this issue. To protect the quality of the environment and quality of life in all Australian states, a similar stand must be taken on population growth at the federal level. Federal, state and local governments need to ensure the provision of an integrated environmental protection policy for the community and ESD.

Melville Conservation Group can only support a strategy, which plans to both promote the stabilisation of population growth and repair the current environmental damage, thereby ensuring a healthy and safe environment for all species. It is time to adopt a precautionary principle, in order to safeguard the options of future generations and adopt a population policy. To protect Australia's environment, population growth needs to be stabilised and it is clearly within the power of the Commonwealth Government to do so quickly with a moratorium on immigration. With the funds saved from this industry, finances would then be available for diversion towards repairing and maintaining a safe and healthy Australian environment. Australia like every other nation now has to limit population, repair and protect the environment and provide environmentally sustainable industries and jobs. Australia should take the lead in this strategy.

**Government Departments and ESD:**

The Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) depends on immigration for its existence and has shown no attention to the issue of ESD, while it continues to facilitate increasing population growth. It is then a difficult job for other departments to deal with ESD, when a huge number of adult, full-blown, immediate consumers and polluters arrive each year. The birthrate adds a similar number of persons, but the adverse impact is slower and gradual, allowing room to deal with the problems more effectively and easily. DIMA's unfortunate decisions cause enormous ESD problems for other commonwealth departments and state and local governments to try to "manage". Other developed countries in Europe have stabilised their populations (with lower birthrates than Australia), which is the goal required for every nation including Australia, if the environment is to be conserved.

DIMA proposed in their submission to the draft report some "pivotal considerations" eg (1) "population redistribution and mobility" - however, 'the environmental impact is the same whether the population numbers are in the city or in regional areas. This idea amounts to moving the deckchairs around on the Titanic.. Increasing numbers of persons are unsustainable wherever they are located.

(2) "lowering consumption levels' to sustain a higher population - however, the community would appreciate information on the subsistence level being considered for Australians. Public sector pricing policies are cited also, to further lower the Australian standard of living. The majority of Australians do not live profligate lives and the standard of living is already much lower than in most other developed countries, as indicated in OECD data. Many Australians have witnessed a steady decline in their quality of life, with diminishing services in health, education and public transport and further constraints now on water and other essential resources. Even beaches now are being considered for charges, due to the pressure of population growth.

(3) "productivity and technology" - however, this is cargo cult mentality, based on presumptions that may never happen. The precautionary principle and all the warnings of leading scientists and their rigorous research have been ignored by DIMA.

(4) "lifestyle choices" - however, an explanation is needed on whether Australia will have a small sustainable population with a good quality of life or a high population with a low quality of life. No doubt Australia could emulate the Bangladeshi population, with similar results. DIMA seems unable to comprehend that the environment is uniquely fragile in Australia and cannot simplistically be compared with the carrying capacity of other fertile parts of the planet.

(5) "A reliance on waste management and disposal and land management practices" to ease the problems has been put forward - again presumptuously however, since Australia's leading scientists have continued to warn that Australia's growing population has disastrous consequences. Air, water and soil pollution have taken an enormous toll and already Australia has cleared too much marginal fragile land for agriculture and irrigation to grow food and fibre for the present population and provide export dollars for imports.

The federal and various state State of the Environment reports have provided graphic evidence of Australia's environmental degradation. However, unless government departments and agencies (like DIMA) at federal, state and local levels make

environmentally sustainable decisions, Australia is pointed towards environmental collapse. As we enter the new century ahead, Australia needs leadership on ESD. Australia can only provide a decent standard of living to an environmentally sustainable population with environmentally sustainable industries - currently many leading industries are not - and environmentally sustainable jobs.

OLIVE LANGHAM (convenor)  
30 March 1999