

Comment on ‘Population and Environment in Australia: 2003’ by Dr Colin D Butler.

Rawdon Dalrymple

The importance of Dr Butler’s paper lies in its insistence on the need for a closer engagement of relevant Australian science in the examination of population policy issues and the implication that this should be a reciprocal engagement. The paper calls for a greater engagement not only between environmental scientists and geographers and demographers, but also “more involvement by social scientists” (8.1, 8.2, 8.3). No doubt the latter need (and in general would welcome) more intensive dialogue and interaction on population issues with environmental scientists and geographers. Dr Butler seeks to demonstrate that need by identifying deficiencies (and even, in the case of economists “particularly naïve assumptions”) in discussion of population issues by social scientists and others who are not environmental scientists. His central argument is strengthened by the deficiencies in his own treatment of the issues raised in “social science” discussions of population policy. Not only has he demonstrated that the whole debate needs more engagement of environmental scientists but in the process he shows, if partly inadvertently, that any attempt to develop a coherent policy position needs the engagement of several disciplines.

The Summary section at the beginning of this paper has the following Conclusion:

Powerful forces, largely external, are likely to force substantial increases in the Australian population in the coming decades, even against the wishes of the broad population. Debate, scientific research and the adoption of new technologies, economic theories, and social and farming practices are essential to improve the economic, social and environmental resilience which Australia will need to cope with this challenge.

That Conclusion is an excellent, succinct statement of a view I share with a number of others on the issue. But to reconcile it with the discussion in the paper itself requires postulating that Dr Butler shares the “social scientist” position in that Conclusion while believing that its proponents have neglected the environmental science implications of population increase and have failed to make a satisfactory case that those implications can be dealt with by foreseeable scientific and technological advances, improved practices and public policies to reduce or limit the “average Australian ecological footprint”. Alternatively (or additionally) he might be seen to share the view that, while an increased population will inevitably lead to further environmental damage, “this may be an acceptable trade-off for other benefits, such as to the economy and to future security” (P.32).

One problem with this paper is that it appears to seek from what it broadly identifies as the social science arguments and the policy arguments the sort of methodology which is required in the physical sciences. It is noted that the CSIRO Resources Futures Program (8.5) is “by far the most sophisticated yet undertaken in Australia regarding potential population and environmental scenarios” but is weakened by its failure to model the

argument “that an insufficient population may leave Australia vulnerable in an increasingly unstable and possibly violent region”. It is not surprising that scientists have eschewed attempts to model or quantify that core argument. Like all arguments in international relations and global politics it depends on historical extrapolations, assumptions and choices between alternative general theories in the discipline. In dealing with “The business lobby” (10) the paper asserts that the position of the Australian Population Institute is “based mostly on assertion rather research”. It would be desirable that policy positions were “based upon science rather than assertion and hope” but the role of science here cannot be to displace all other critical thinking on the issues. It has an essential role which has no doubt been insufficiently regarded and deployed, and that includes identifying “naïve assumptions” and assertions which demonstrably fly in the face of scientific fact. But does environmental science show us that it is “inevitable” that larger population produces more environmental damage? Surely that can be at least greatly influenced by public policies deploying taxation, infrastructure development and other resource allocation.

An example in the Australian context is agriculture. Dr Butler baldly states that increasing population will increase agriculture production either for domestic production or for export or both. But the economist might argue that this is an unwarranted assumption. At present 80% of Australian agricultural production is exported. That production is responsible for nearly 80% of Australian water usage. The share of agriculture in Australia’s exports has declined steadily and dramatically. The public cost of supporting some high impact agriculture in Australia is surely overdue for review. Cotton requires the most water intensive cultivation, using far more water than any other industry in Australia. In 2002 cotton exports were worth A\$ 1.255 billion (about 0.8 of 1% of Australia’s exports). Does it make sense for the driest continent in the world to be growing cotton, or indeed rice and perhaps some other crops totally dependent on irrigation which could be better left to more appropriately endowed (water rich) economies elsewhere?

Surely environmental science can hardly tell us that we cannot have a larger population without increasing agriculture. The critical factor in that is public policy. That is indeed the neglected factor in the sweeping claim that “increased population *will* inevitably lead to further environmental damage”. Public opinion and public policy need to be reviewed in more detail and more rigorously in the follow-up discussion than they are in this paper. The discussions of foreign aid, the brain drain effects of immigration, social cohesion and the relationship between the global effects and problems and the specific issues for Australia also require criticism for which there is not space here.

Finally, the discussion of national security and vulnerability in the population policy context is very over-simplified. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss that as a separate issue in this debate. It requires consideration of the dimensions of power and self-reliance and is not just a matter of the threat of military invasion.