

## Commentary on the Butler report

### Population and Environment: stepping back to get a wider view

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#### Introduction

The question of the impact of the Australian population on its environment will not, and cannot, be resolved by treating it as an 'issue'. This is the message for me in Colin Butler's report to the Australian Academy of Science. By 'issue', I mean regarding the question as a discrete problem amenable to specific policy or other responses. People's perceptions of the question are deeply influenced by their worldviews; their differences cannot be assessed, let alone reconciled, except at this level.

The division between people's opinions on Australia's 'human carrying capacity' or 'optimal population' reflects the differences between two worldviews – material progress and sustainable development. Thus these opinions reflect differences over much more than numbers of people who can – or should - inhabit this island continent. They have to do with fundamental questions about the purpose of life and the foundations of human health and happiness.

Material progress, the dominant paradigm of modern Western societies like Australia, regards progress as a pipeline: pump more wealth in one end, and more welfare flows out the other. Economic growth is paramount. It creates the wealth necessary to raise material living standards, to widen our choices, and to address social and environmental problems such as unemployment, poverty, crime, pollution, land degradation and global warming. Australian Governments explicitly frame their goals in these terms. 'The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over four per cent on average during the decade to 2010,' the Prime Minister, John Howard, declared in a speech to a World Economic Forum Dinner in Melbourne in 1998.<sup>1</sup> According to this perspective, then, more is usually better, including more people. The most common argument in favour of population growth is that it is necessary if Australia is to remain economically competitive and so maintain rates of economic growth.

Sustainable development, on the other hand, does not accord economic growth 'overriding' priority. Instead, it seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmental and economic goals and objectives to produce a high, equitable and enduring quality of life. A common theme is the perceived need to shift from *quantity* to *quality* in our way of life and our measurements. The World Commission on Environment and Development described it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.<sup>2</sup> The World Conservation Union (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program and

the World Wide Fund for Nature have defined it as ‘improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems’.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable development acknowledges the dynamic relationship between the goals of improving wellbeing and ensuring that improvements are compatible with a healthy natural environment. According to this view of the world, limiting human populations is one of a wide array of changes in human organisation needed to achieve sustainability.

Which is the better framework for making decisions and taking actions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

If we take the three dominant measures of the human condition – population size, life expectancy and per capita income – we can conclude that, globally and nationally, many more people are living much richer, longer lives today than ever before. So is all well and good? Not exactly. Against the gains we have to set several qualifications: the benefits have been unevenly distributed globally and there have been recent reversals in some nations; the benefits of rising income to quality of life diminish as income increases, and in rich nations health and happiness are at best only weakly related to average income levels; economic growth is not the only factor behind improving health and wellbeing - increased knowledge, better education and institutional reforms have also made major contributions; and increases in life expectancy partly reflect biomedical advances and individual lifestyle choices that say little about changes in social conditions and may be offsetting adverse health impacts of these changes.

Beyond these qualifications of the benefits of material progress, we must also acknowledge several formidable and growing costs: the destruction of the natural environment, of which we are an intrinsic part, on a scale that grows ever greater and more pervasive; increasing inequalities in income and employment, pressures on public services such as health and education, and the geographic concentration of disadvantage; and psychic costs that relate to what might be called meaning in life - a sense of purpose, autonomy, identity, belonging and hope.

It is for all these reasons, then, that the concept of sustainable development has become widely accepted in the past decade, and represents the most significant challenge to date to material progress as the defining process of human development.

Researchers acknowledge that sustainability is fundamentally about values, not simply policy and practice. New values underpin the preferred visions of both the United Nations Environment Program’s *Geo-3* report and the Stockholm Environment Institute’s influential report, *Great Transition*, for example.<sup>4,5</sup> The latter’s ‘Great Transition’ is galvanised by the search for a deeper basis for human happiness and fulfilment. While sustainability is the imperative that pushes the new agenda, desire for a rich quality of life, strong human ties and a resonant connection to nature is the lure that pulls it towards the future.

There is now evidence that a growing segment of the population – between a quarter and a third of people in developed nations - is shifting from a worldview framed by material

progress to one defined by sustainable development.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Governments are lagging behind informed public opinion. This proportion can only increase as the costs of global inequality, climate change, excessive consumption and other challenges become greater and more obvious.

What does this broad analysis of human progress mean for the ‘population and environment’ debate in Australia? It means that both Australia’s population size and how it affects the natural environment will ultimately and significantly be determined by which worldview prevails – within Australia and globally. A population target cannot usefully be set outside this larger context. How many people live in Australia will emerge as an outcome of a very much bigger debate about what makes for a better life.

## References

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## Note

This analysis draws on the author’s book on progress and wellbeing, to be published next year.