

Response to Colin Butler's paper for Academy of Science

## How we might think about population-environment more effectively

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Reading Colin Butler's paper dragged me back to the issue of population-environment (PE) linkages, which I had left several years ago, and reminded me both of its importance and the reasons I had concentrated since on other, less frustrating, dimensions of the sustainability question. Butler is right: the PE debate is simplistic, acrimonious, and less informed by good research than it might be. I will comment on these issues from the perspective of a researcher engaged in policy and institutional dimensions of sustainability, and will suggest two ways of reframing the PE debate – to take into account a greater range of variables as determining PE relationships, and to consider what policy and institutional settings would enhance more purposeful, informed debate.

With colleagues I undertook commissioned research for the recently-established Bureau of Immigration (later Immigration, Multicultural and Population) Research (BIMPR) in the early 1990s, to explore environmental dimensions of immigration and population (Dovers et al 1992; Norton et al 1994). The first of these considered PE linkages through the identification of population variables other than gross human numbers and environmental scales other than the entire continent (this singular notion dominated debate at the time, and regrettably still does); specifically:

- ◇ Population pressures in a given place as including natural increase, immigration, internal migration, and international and domestic tourism;
- ◇ Total human pressure on the environment at a given scale as determined by population numbers, spatial distribution of population, the *per capita* consumption and impact patterns of the population, and inter-regional flows of energy and matter;
- ◇ The Australian environment as a heterogeneous complex of places and resources with different levels of resilience/vulnerability to different human pressures; and
- ◇ Policy options as including limiting human numbers generally (migration, natural increase), reducing some or all aspects of *per capita* impact, settlement and tourism policy, and influencing the population/sustainability conditions in other countries through increased and targeted aid.

Reactions to this line were mixed. Leading anti-immigration advocates told me bluntly that I had gone over to the dark side by working with the Bureau, which was perceived as unforgivably pro-immigration. Nevertheless, they embraced the conclusion that, all other things being equal, population growth in a given place and time would be at the expense of other species and natural resources. But they viewed the issue of *per capita* consumption as a diversion from their core concern of gross numbers. Pro-growth advocates on the other hand only recognized those variable that could balance the impact of population growth, such as planning and environmental management adjustments. I discovered that the idea of a complex policy mix to attend multiple variables and objectives was not attractive to many in the population debate. However, I firmly believe that the population policy 'debate' (see below) should be framed around these sorts of key variables, rather than more simple notions such as continental carrying capacity. I also believe that an atmosphere of simplistic advocacy, resistance to complex arguments and moral overtones to debate does not encourage researchers – especially early career ones – to engage with the issue.

The second piece of BIMPR commissioned work (Norton et al 1992) reviewed previous and recommended future research in the PE area (the Bureau intended to invest further, in line with its expanded portfolio from immigration to include broader cultural and population issues). These future areas included historical analysis of contributors to environmental degradation (including population), aspects of internal migration and population densification, and integrated PE modeling. Only the latter was commissioned and completed (Cardew and Fanning 1996) before the incoming Howard government disestablished the Bureau and diminished its functions to a residual statistical rump in the immigration department. There is some irony here – a pre-meditated, significant reduction in Australia's capacity to inform population debate, right in the middle of the outbreak of a rancorous, ill-informed public argument over immigration and its cultural and economic impacts.

Following these experiences, I considered the issue of why it was so difficult to have a constructive debate about population policy. Perhaps the issue was just too complex and sensitive? Yet many difficult attributes of the PE problem are shared by other sustainability issues (Dovers 2001) and,

although less progress is made on such other issues as we might wish, at least focused research is encouraged and processes put in place for policy debate. Whereas the population 'debate' is, rather, a mix of acrimonious advocacy and the swapping of slogans with like-minded people, and the basic structures and processes of policy debate are missing. So my second suggestion for reframing the debate is this – if we wished to have an informed and purposeful population policy debate, what would be the sorts of basic structures and processes to enable that debate? Some fairly standard suggestions are (Dovers 1997):

- ◇ A ministerial council, with more-than-usual local government representation, to allow national coordination and better integration of planning, health, environmental, economic, etc, elements of population (or, more accurately perhaps, of 'settlement'). Such mechanisms are commonplace in other policy sectors;
- ◇ An inclusive body charged with advising the above council, engendering informed public debate, and identifying priority R&D areas, including environmental, migrant, industry, etc representatives. Such bodies are not unusual in many policy sectors (ie. something like the short-lived National Population Council (NPC));
- ◇ An *independent* R&D agency or corporation to inform the PE debate (ie. like the short-lived BIMPR). (NB: in the primary industries arena, R&D corporations are co-funded with industry – perhaps those industries with a professed interest in population change might wish to come forward.). Currently, and this is consistent with the commercialization of R&D in Australia, the direction of population research is easily determined by partisan commission; and
- ◇ A set process of policy debate, utilising the above, and aiming to clarify key information needs, trade-offs and principles rather than arrive at a magic number. Such a process might include use of innovative approaches such as deliberative polling or consensus conferences as well as the more usual summits, submissions, etc (a combination, but higher profile and more sustained, of the NPC and parliamentary processes that reported in 1992 and 1994).

While it is true that sustainability more broadly is poorly served by institutional arrangements (Dovers 2001; Connor and Dovers in press), it is certainly the case that population-environment issues are particularly poorly catered for in the Australian landscape of public policy.

The challenge is to have an intellectual and policy debate that accepts that PE is a complex, dynamic policy problem, and seeks similarly complex analyses and policy responses. Australia has yet to have such a debate, but rather has arguments about simple, predetermined (and often pre-intellectual) positions. Breaking that impasse is a key challenge, and I offer the strategies of reframing the problem and creating the preconditions for a proper public policy process. Another strategy would be to engage new voices in the debate, ones which might do more than repeat the same lines over and over again.

## References

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