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## Commentary



# A whole-of-government approach to population policy for Australia

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## 1. Introduction

Australia is in the midst of a popularly-constructed crisis of population. This so-called crisis, in social terms, is not dissimilar to the many which have come before in Australia's history. Yet Australia's contemporary crisis differs in that the focus of the oft-referred-to population debate has come to revolve primarily around immigration and the politics of problematising population.

The problematisation of population occurs in many countries across the world, and is much about immigration and the effects of migrants on settlement areas, particularly as fertility has declined. Constructing population as a social problem means any consideration of population-related matters typically results in the portrayal of population, specifically immigration, as the root cause of social ills. Talk of population has, unhelpfully, come to focus on race and ethnicity. For example, with ambivalence Japan has widened immigration intake to allow additional visas for much-needed skilled workers (Murakami 2018). Despite the need for migrants, Japanese people are concerned about the effects of foreign workers. Concerns relate to whether migrant workers will fit in and what pressures they might place on the pension and welfare scheme. Apparent concerns also relate to how immigration will change Japan. In a more overt example of problematisation, the United States President Donald Trump has framed immigration as a threat to the American people (Bennett 2017).

Population growth in Australia, fuelled by net overseas migration, has prompted calls from politicians and social commentators across the political spectrum for a population inquiry and policy debate. Questions have been raised over what might be the best, and or, sustainable population size for Australia; and more importantly, whether greater intervention is needed to restrict the level of migration and the source countries of migrants.

Current calls for a population policy reflect wider social concerns which have come to be conflated with population growth (especially due to immigration), including housing affordability, adequacy of public infrastructure, and environmental conservation. A dominant narrative has emerged: inequality is further exacerbated by migration, conjuring nationalist and protectionist sentiments.

The present social and political contexts are such that a population policy is likely for the first time in the country's recent history. The government has indeed signalled a population policy (focused on migrant settlement) will be put forward with haste (Benson 2018). Yet exactly what constitutes an appropriate population policy for contemporary Australia is still yet to be determined. The breadth of population-related issues lends itself to an approach which seeks to embed and contextualise population among wider government business – which requires a whole-of-government, joined-up approach.

## 2. Background

Population policies, as a general principle, seek to address or influence components of population change, namely births, deaths and migration (Demeny 1975). The concept of population policies conjures notions of restrictive and coercive government interventions designed to control various aspects of people's lives. It is considered that Australia already has a quasi or de facto population policy by way of the Migration Program (Allen 2011; McDonald 2003; Productivity Commission 2016). The Migration Program is currently capped at 190,000 permanent migrants per year. While this cap has gone unchanged since 2012, the actual intake has fluctuated below the cap in recent years (Treasury 2018). Despite the spectre of population as an ongoing feature in the Australian political landscape, Australia has not had an official population policy since the early-1970s (Allen 2011; Jones 1997). This most recent population policy was established following the Second World War when a growth target of 2 per cent was set to bolster population growth, equally through births and immigration. Australia's last population policy was in response to fears Australia was unable to defend itself against the threat of external foreign power (Jones 1997).

Population inquiries are dotted throughout Australia's history (Allen 2017). The most recent, the Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia, was completed in 2011 after concerns over a 'big' Australia, and echoed the findings of previous inquiries (Allen 2011). Hundreds of submissions were received from a wide range of organisations and individuals. Grand statements and commitments were made as part of the latest inquiry, relating to how the government of the day would address the population crisis. No population targets were set (DSEWPC 2011). The year-long process and fanfare of the report release conjured a feeling of change (Allen 2017). The sense of change was short-lived as it became clear the population strategy was in name only, as the existing policy environment continued. The enduring finding of Australia's population inquiries has been that preparedness and responsiveness are central for the nation to weather demographic difficulties (Allen 2017). Quality population data – especially from censuses, births, deaths and migration, and population projections – are vital to being prepared and responsive to the demographic needs of the future.

Intergenerational reports (IGR) published by the federal Treasury department, roughly every five years, are an important part of informing strategic direction using demographic and economic data about now and what might be into the future. The most recent IGR, in 2015, was accompanied by the public awareness campaign Challenge of Change (Treasury 2015). Public backlash over the costs, lack of environmental considerations, and political tone of the campaign doomed the only real attempt Australia has seen in recent time to engage the nation in a conversation about its demographic future. And what Australia is presented with, in demographic terms is about managing change.

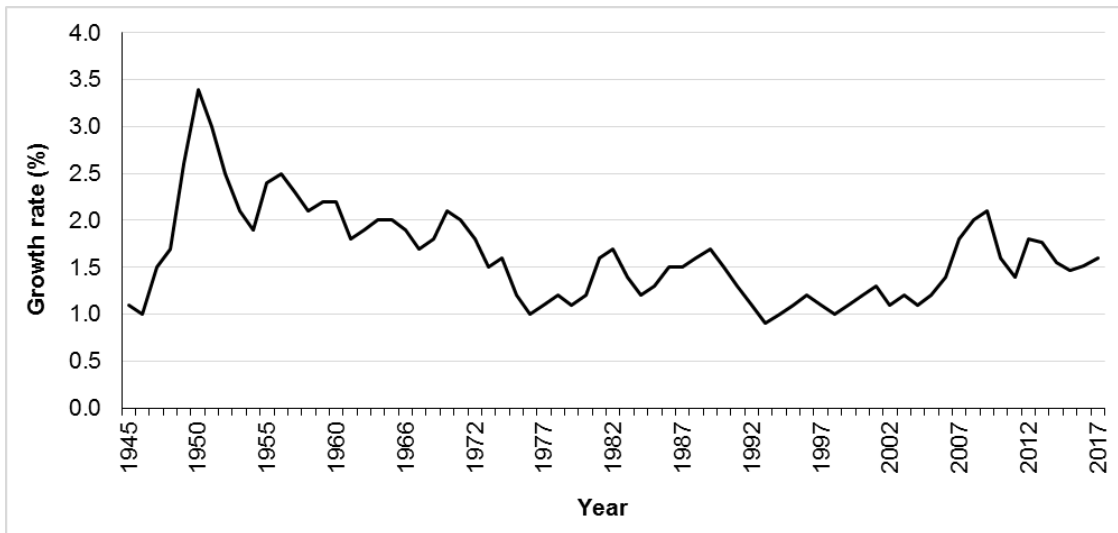
Popular and political discourse portrays a crisis of overpopulation in contemporary Australia. Focus on Australia's size and growth has undeniable political motivations, particularly in the present response from the minor and major political parties. Leaders from the two major political parties have commented publicly on immigration and its impacts on Australia.

The leader of the opposition, Bill Shorten, has expressed concern that the number of overseas migrants is adversely impacting on wages and contributing to insecure and inaccessible paid work for locals. Shorten has argued for a reduction in temporary migration (Baxendale 2018). In contrast, the conservative Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, supports the current Migration Program. As Treasurer, Morrison promoted the economic benefits of current overseas migration levels (Murphy 2018). The minister responsible for the broad home affairs portfolio, Peter Dutton, has called for lowering migrant intake as well as a preference for people from racially similar backgrounds as the majority Australian population (Koziol 2018). The minister directly responsible for immigration, David Coleman, advocates the social and economic value of multiculturalism in Australia (Acharya 2018). Conversely Alan Tudge, the minister responsible for population (among cities and urban infrastructure), has been colloquially appointed as the congestion-buster (Elton-Pym 2018). Tudge has proposed Australia makes more concerted efforts to encourage settlement of overseas migrants into regional areas, or in the least areas outside the three major cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Overpopulation in the three major cities has featured among Tudge's rhetoric.

Minor parties in Australia have put forward a number of proposals during 2018 concerning immigration and race. An immigration plebiscite was proposed by the leader of the minor nationalist party, Pauline Hanson. Hanson's proposed immigration plebiscite reflects growing sentiment among those opposed to current migration intake that all Australians should have a say about the level of immigration. Hanson also sought recognition of the Australian parliament that it is 'OK to be white' (Karp 2018a). While the motion was inadvertently supported by the government, Parliament voted narrowly against it. Additionally, a failed attempt to hold a plebiscite to limit immigration from only European countries was proposed by Fraser Anning, a member of another minor Australian nationalist party (McCulloch 2018). Anning has since been expelled from his party due to his racially-motivated public commentary (Karp 2018b).

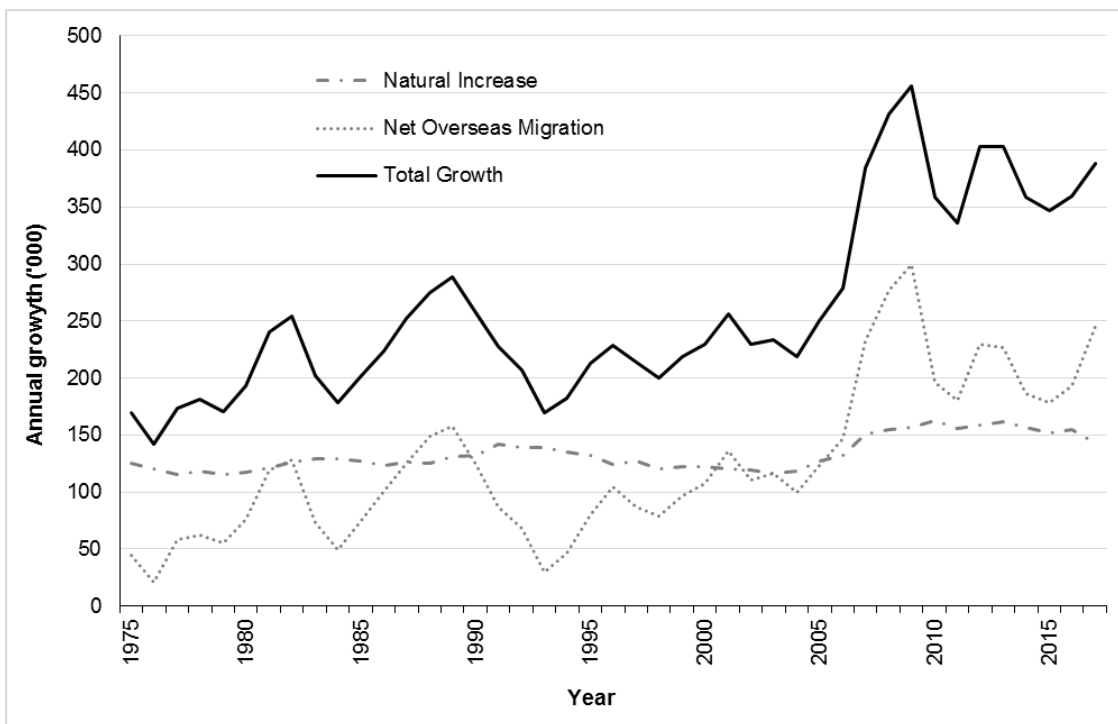
Data tell an interesting story, and contextualise the populist problematisation of population in Australia. Population growth in Australia at 1.6% (for the year to 30 June 2017) is higher than the world average and considerably higher than countries among those in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in particular Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Allen 2018a). Figure 1 shows population growth in Australia has been strong over the 10 years to 2017 (in the context of annual growth since 1945), despite the global financial crisis (GFC). It is not surprising that Australia emerged from the GFC comparatively unscathed when compared with similar countries. Strong population growth and economic measures taken by the then government were major factors.

Driving the majority of population growth over the past 12 years has been net overseas migration (ABS 2018a). Figure 2 presents the contributions of net overseas migration and natural increase to total population growth since 1975, which was when fertility dropped to replacement level before falling to below-replacement levels, where it has remained since (Allen 2018a).



**Figure 1: Annual population growth, Australia, 1945-2017**

Source: ABS 2014; ABS 2018a. Notes: Annual figures to 30 June.

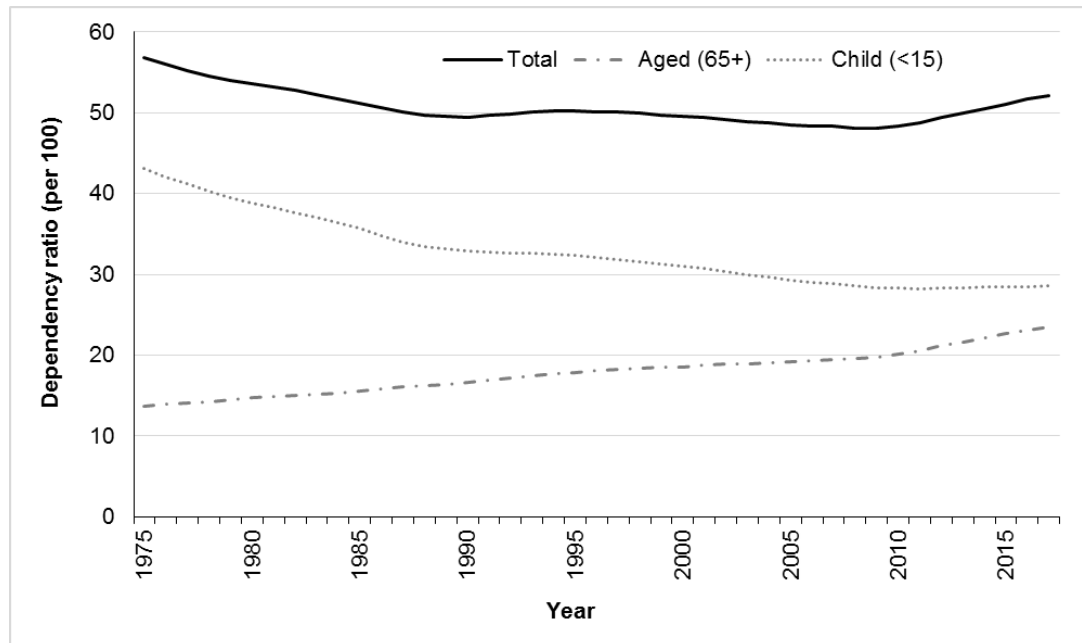


**Figure 2: Components of population change, Australia, 1975-2017**

Source: ABS 2014; ABS 2018a. Notes: Annual figures to 30 June. The definition used in calculating estimates of net overseas migration (NOM) changed in 2006. Caution should be taken when comparing NOM over time.

Overseas migration has become a vital component of the population and economic landscape in Australia as a response to population ageing. Population ageing is increasing old-age related dependency, meaning growing pressure on the working age population to contribute income tax to fund government-provided essential services (Allen 2017). Recent immigration in Australia has been shown to affect greater rates of labour force participation (Treasury 2018; Productivity Commission

2016), helping to moderate the adverse economic pressures of an ageing population by way of the co-called dependency burden (Allen 2018b). Figure 3 illustrates the increasing dependency rates over the 1975 to 2017 period.



**Figure 3: Age-related dependency ratios, Australia, 1975-2017**

Source: ABS 2014; ABS 2018a. Notes: Annual figures to 30 June.

Government spending is highest for people aged over 65 years according to Rice, Temple and McDonald (2014; cited in Treasury 2015). Increasing old-age dependency thus has clear consequences for the fiscal pressures on government spending and flow on impacts for people in the labour force contributing income tax. Furthermore, a worrying risk emerges whereby young people – the future workforce – compete for government spending for more pressing and costly demographic demands. Socioeconomic and demographic inequality thus becomes a risk facing Australia.

Alongside this inequality is the unequal opportunities experienced throughout Australian towns and communities. The three major cities along Australia's east coast welcome the largest share of immigration. Population growth is greatest in the capital cities of Melbourne (2.7% in the year to 30 June 2017), Sydney (2.0%) and Brisbane (2.0%). Conversely, areas outside these capitals experience vastly different growth rates, and even decline (as is the case in areas outside the capital in the Northern Territory). Furthermore, there are regions across Australia with declining or struggling populations, largely due to changing labour force supply and demand.

Planning and infrastructure are playing catch-up in Australia. Rather than face head on the infrastructure and planning challenges posed by population growth, it has been suggested that the strategy in recent decades has been for the states with the majority share of immigration to ignore infrastructure needs (Hartcher 2018). This has resulted in two-speed population growth story. Cities

are under pressure to accommodate population, whereas regional areas are under pressure to retain or attract population.

Unequal population distribution across Australia highlights population pressure points and exacerbates the notion that population is problematic. There have been a number of attempts in recent decades to encourage migrants to establish themselves initially in regional areas upon moving to Australia, with the hope that immigrants might establish themselves and stay on in these areas. Towns have initiated migrant settlements, including the highly publicised Luv-a-Duck business which offers a good case study into how small towns can attract population, with adequate employment opportunities. The Nhill community in rural western Victoria teamed up with the local duck farm and processing plant to settle Karen refugees from Myanmar in the area to fill much needed skills at Luv-a-Duck (AMES & Deloitte Access Economics 2015). The Nhill example highlights the need for viable opportunities for migrants to maximise success. Destination areas must offer essential services and infrastructure for migrants to be able to establish themselves socially, culturally and economically. Similarly, such opportunities could also attract local internal migration.

### **3. A population policy for the future**

The demographic pressures of population ageing in Australia demand a contemporary rethink of the approach to the development of population policy. The issue of population cannot be merely reduced to numbers or demographic statistics about births, deaths and migration. Nor is population just about age composition, population distribution, and labour force participation.

Migration remains an ongoing feature of a population policy for Australia, as does infrastructure which supports the population (physical, social, environmental or economic). Australia must look to make opportunities of its demographic challenges by being prepared and responsive to population composition which might adversely impact national socioeconomic wellbeing. Considerations of a population policy for Australia include: health, education, gender equality, family-friendly workplaces, transportation, housing, land use, green space, water supply, food production, energy use, environmental sustainability, settlement distribution, and climate change, and many more.

Population policy reflects myriad complex social issues which sit across numerous ministerial portfolios, necessitating a whole-of-government approach to population policy. The reasons most recent attempts at population policy in Australia have been unsuccessful might lie in the fact that a coordinated approach is necessary and has not been attempted or achieved. A reconnection of the disparately placed pieces of the population puzzle might be the best way forward for a contemporary population policy for Australia. Carey, McLoughlin & Crammond (2015 p. 176) point to how 'joined-up government' is required to address complex or 'wicked' social problems, 'and overcome siloed departmental approaches'.

Carey and colleagues demonstrate how socially complex issues which cross departmental boundaries and have interdependencies between issues can be successfully addressed through whole-of-government, joined-up approaches. Drawing on the Australian government's approach to the complex problem of social inclusion, Carey et al. (2015) show how multidimensional, complex and contested social issues can effectively move beyond impasse via what the authors refer to as innovation narratives.

Innovation narratives enable a change to how a complex issue is perceived, and so shift values to facilitate the desired change (Carey, McLoughlin & Crammond 2015). Carey and colleagues warn that innovation narratives are not about behaviour modification, but rather they can challenge thinking with the aim to change perceptions. Innovation narratives are effective at gaining coherence within policy- and decision-makers across government departments, but they can also be extended to community involvement.

Storytelling and communication are crucial to innovation narratives through the coordination of people and ideas and dissemination of information. While innovation narratives are shown to be effective among policy makers (Carey 2016; Carey, McLoughlin & Crammond 2015), such an approach to elicit perception change could be trialled to bring the population policy domain together. It is unlikely, nor ideal, that all Australians will agree on population matters. What is possible (and more helpful) is the mobilisation of the Australian public with the common goal in mind that at the heart of population matters is the one aim to achieve a fair Australia in which wellbeing is the paramount concern. Through this process, population ceases to be the issue. What becomes the focus, instead, is the infrastructure and support for Australians. More importantly, government core business is to deliver for the people, not blame people (locals or migrants).

Despite the failed attempt to promote the evolving needs associated with a changing demography under the guise of the Challenge of Change campaign, the aim of such a campaign is a positive move forward (Allen 2017). A worthwhile endeavour would be to reconsider the option of innovation narratives through a change management communication strategy. This requires politicians to refrain from framing population (particularly immigration) as problematic. Ideally, such an undertaking would be non-partisan. However, a non-partisan approach to population-related matters is unlikely. Nonetheless, an attempt to do so would be worthwhile.

Because population features in many areas of government, an effective coordinated approach to policy is difficult. Establishing a minister, ministerial body, or agency with oversight to ensure adequate progress within a population framework is one solution to overcome, or in the very least, minimise the difficulties of the breadth of population-related matters in policy. Such a framework would not be easy, though would position Australia well for the demographic challenges of the future. Carey et al. (2015 p. 184) suggest the development of 'supportive architecture' to maximise the potential success of a whole-of-government approach. Lines of accountability should be among the first things to establish. New administrative structures – and thus new ways of doing population policy – to support clear accountability can help achieve integration and a breaking down of departmental silos (Carey, McLoughlin & Crammond 2015). Possible points of failure in a whole-of-government approach to population policy include: inadequate government and/or departmental commitment, opposing ideologies among ministers, and rigid organisational structures. According to Carey and colleagues (2015 p. 183) apart from a mandate for change embedded in policy, 'establishing coherence between institutional and operational level action' is essential to implementing a whole-of-government approach to population policy for Australia. To this end, flexibility, coherence and communication are vital. This new way of approaching population policy requires evidence and a framework for assessing achievements.

The development of a framework with a set of measureable indicators to report and monitor success towards population-related wellbeing could provide an opportunity for the public to remain

informed of Australia's progress. Such a framework, and related indicators, could be modelled after the global sustainable development goals (UNDP 2018) and be reported on as part of the IGR process. Release of five-yearly IGRs could coincide with the release of Australian Bureau of Statistics population projections. Publication of data and information informing the IGR and evaluation framework via a publically accessible website would help facilitate evidence-sharing for communities across Australia.

An overall population target, or even a target for growth is unnecessary, and has the potential to lead to coercive or restrictive measures. The current approach for setting the annual permanent migration cap is sensible, and allows for flexibility to enable a temporary migrant intake which is demand-driven. A focus on size and growth rates has been a major factor in the current population discourse and has had the effect of shifting the attention away from productive action onto matters of race and ethnicity. This numbers game is harmful.

Optimal or carrying capacity population size is not determinable for Australia as technological advancements prohibit any sensible calculation. It may be that innovation is the major limitation for growth. Additionally, there is a paucity of good quality up-to-date research identifying the best migrant intake for Australia to maximise social and economic benefits. An effective migration scheme should be informed by evidence. A program of research to inform such an evidence base for Australia's Migration Program would guarantee the necessary investments were made in a timely and responsive manner and the intake did not lead to adverse consequences.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Population policy is necessary in Australia, not only because of the current political and populist climate, but because of the demographic challenges which lie ahead. An official population policy would address both the present problematising of demographic difficulties. The so-called population crisis is not so much a crisis of numbers or people but rather a crisis of long-term inaction. A population policy for Australia should provide a blueprint for the future – a framework for what the nation aspires to be.

The process to create a population policy for Australia need not be by way of a formal inquiry. More importantly, consensus or majority public opinion is not necessary for the type of population policy proposed here. A public process of sorts, nonetheless, is advised. Current population discourse would be well served through innovation narratives seeking to shift the perceived problem of population. Such innovation narratives could be facilitated by an administrative population body within government.

Whole-of-government oversight to ensure communication and action is effective across ministerial portfolios is a necessary component of a population policy. Evidence gathering from and by experts, alongside a process of community communication through innovation narratives, would provide a solid foundation for which government could establish a framework for the future of Australia.

The most effective population policy for Australia is one which embeds population-related concerns and issues in the foundation of funding and policy-making processes. In doing so, population is no



longer stigmatised. Instead, population is placed as the basis for government plans for the future, and evidence will help guide the path forward.

## 5. Key messages

- A whole-of-government approach, reflecting population-related interdependencies across government departments, is required to achieve an effective response to the complex social issues of population.
- A framework for the implementation of a whole-of-government population policy requires appropriate administrative structures enabling flexibility, coherence, and communication across siloed government departments.
- Research and evidence focussed on the myriad considerations of a contemporary population policy is crucial to successful policy outcomes.

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