

# State the obvious in big Australia debate

Population policy requires a federation fix, writes **Oliver Hartwich**.

A WEEK is a long time in politics, and 1½ months feels like an eternity. During the election campaign not a day passed without contributions to the “big” versus a “small” Australia debate. Now, just a few weeks later, politicians are giving their attention to questions like vote pairing and parliamentary reform.

Just because politicians have returned to their usual pastimes does not mean that the issue of population growth has gone away. The population keeps growing regardless, whether politicians are talking about it or not. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for a coherent strategy to deal with this development.

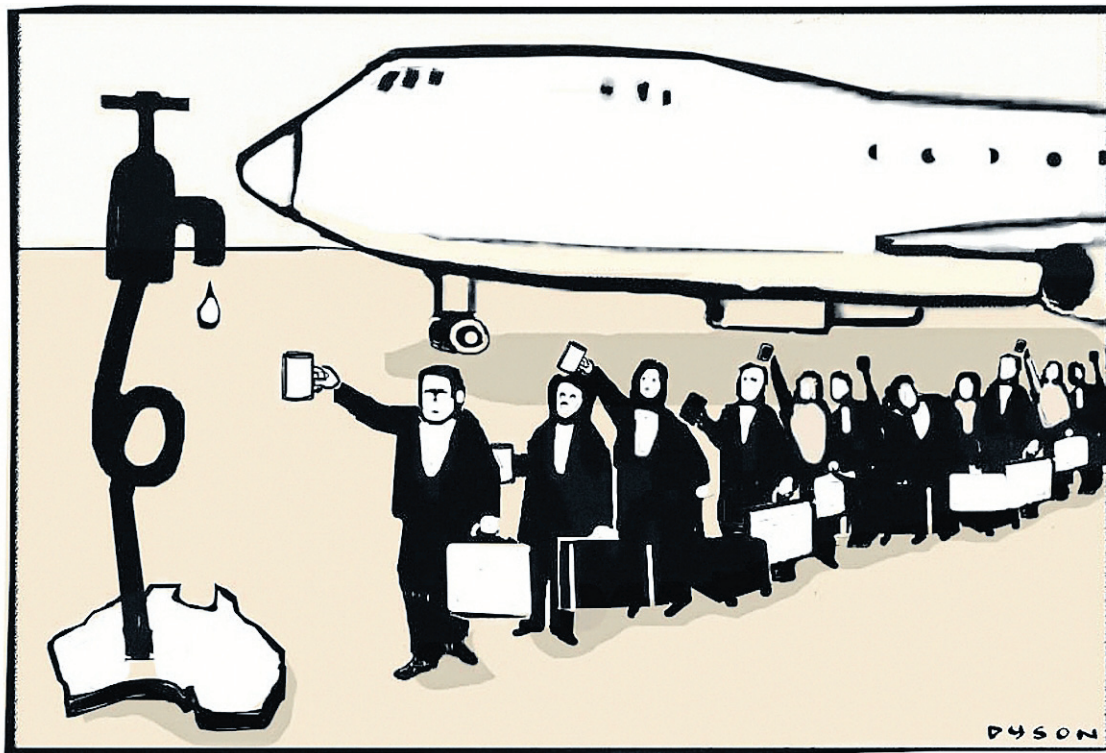
Any reasonable population policy needs to begin with a frank admission: the ability of policymakers to fine-tune the number of people living in Australia is limited. The decisive factors in determining population size are not levers politicians can easily pull.

How big a future Australia will be depends on three variables: fertility, life expectancy, and immigration.

Governments around the world have been trying to influence fertility rates. Sometimes, as with China’s “one-child policy”, they try to decrease them. Other times, and with measures like the “baby bonus”, they try to increase them. However, most attempts, particularly on the pro-family side, have had limited success. In the end, it is parents who decide how many children they want to have, not governments. Actually, this is also how it should be.

Our future life expectancy is another variable that governments cannot control. Progress in medical treatments or healthier lifestyles may well be supported by governments, but there is no way politicians could ever set a longevity target.

This leaves migration as the only lever over which politicians have at least some control. But even there, their power is limited. When we are talking about Australia’s migration intake, it is easy to forget that we are talking about net migration. There will always be people leaving the country that we can’t stop. Apart from that, there will always be family



STRICTLY LIMITED: Politicians can't fine-tune the numbers.

— Illustration by Andrew Dyson

reunions, demands for skilled labour, and business migration. Not all of these can or should be strictly limited.

Given these circumstances, it is futile to set precise population targets. The best we can do is estimate likely outcomes given the most plausible assumptions about the factors mentioned. Doing this leads us to a figure somewhere around the 35 million people mark for the middle of the century.

Even if we somehow managed to drastically cut the migration intake as Dick Smith and other campaigners demand, Australia would still be heading towards a population of at least 29 million people as a result of its currently young, fertile and longer-living population.

Any honest debate about population therefore has to acknowledge two things: that population size cannot be planned, and that Australia’s population will continue to grow no matter what politicians promise.

This does not mean that Australia does not need a response to population growth. What we do not need are population targets, though.

What we need instead is a strategy how to deal with the expected increases in population.

At the moment, there is a remarkable disconnect in population policy. On the one hand, the federal government reaps the benefits of an increasing population because most taxes flow to Canberra. On the other, most of the costs of population growth are borne by states and councils. It is they who have to provide hospitals, roads and schools for their new residents.

Dealing with population growth therefore requires tackling this imbalance between the Commonwealth and the states. This is even more necessary since Australia’s population growth is distributed unevenly.

Last year, the national population growth rate was 1.8 per cent. However, it was very different between the states and territories. While Tasmania only grew by 1.1 per cent, Queensland grew by 2.7 per cent and Western Australia by 3.1 per cent. There are good reasons to expect these different patterns to continue.

The task for population policy is to

ensure that Australia’s boom regions like Perth and Brisbane receive their fair share of increases in tax revenue that result from our growing population. Ideally, the states should be rewarded for their population growth and not punished. This would also ensure that the resident population would support further increases in population and not fight them.

For Australia as a nation, population growth is an opportunity. Many other developed nations in Europe and Japan would love to swap their problems of population ageing and shrinking for our task of dealing with growth. But we need to ensure that our growth is properly managed. Fixing the relation between Canberra and the states is a necessary first step.

**Dr Oliver Marc Hartwich is a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies. His report *Populate and Perish? Modelling Australia's Demographic Future*, co-authored with Jessica Brown, is released at [cis.org.au](http://cis.org.au) today.**

## Residents realise lopping can go both ways

Fig responses are sparse, writes **Keith Parsons**.

IT’S time Newcastle City Council responded to unanswered questions about the Laman Street trees issue.

For instance, a recent (September 17) injunction hearing was held in the Land and Environment Court to prevent council from immediately removing the trees. The applicant was the Parks and Playgrounds Movement. Why was council represented by an SC (senior council), when a “junior” (and much cheaper) barrister could have handled the case? What was the cost to ratepayers?

Council issued a media release stating that it would close off Laman Street on Monday, September 20, and start lopping the next day. Why then were council vehicles,

including a tree shredder, there on Friday afternoon, September 17? They only left after the injunction became public knowledge. Why mislead the public?

Why did the report to the council meeting on August 17 recommend replacement by a single centre row (of liquidambar, not figs), given that heritage significance was a crucial factor and a council-commissioned report by Heritas Architecture (March, 2010) recommended that the trees be replaced as a double row of a similar species (figs) to recreate the “cathedral arch” canopy effect?

The canopy is the most important element of its heritage significance and can never be replicated with a single row of trees.

While councillors creditably chose figs as replacements, they accepted the anti-heritage recommended option of a single row. Why was there no reference to

the Heritas assessment and recommendations in the report to council, as you would expect?

The only slight reference to heritage in the long report was the claim that the existing double row would “obscure gallery and library facades”. Instead, the report called for renewal, “a new chapter celebrating the seasons”, and “a new beginning rather than celebrating the past”. Does council management seriously regard this advice as sympathetic to heritage and in particular, the Heritas report it commissioned? Was the advice authored by a heritage professional?

The real reason for the single row was cost-saving, and there were oblique references to this in the report to council.

Why was there no advice from council’s heritage officer in the report? This is the normal process.

Why would any council seek to

subvert its own statutory master planning instrument (Newcastle City Centre Local Environmental Plan) by using loopholes in the Roads Act or the Infrastructure SEPP (State Environmental Planning Policy)? Can you imagine council’s outrage if this was attempted by a private developer or state government?

Why is the elected council and its management apparently so afraid to follow normal due process, with a DA and an exhibition period for public comment? Is it simply arrogance or a lack of corporate and councillor knowledge about local government principles?

It’s time this council took a long, hard look at the way it does business with those who elected it.

**Keith Parsons is a former Newcastle City councillor.**

### Topics today



#### Today's fact

Silicon computer circuits will reach their limit by 2012, making further increases in computing power much harder.

#### Today's word

**Charwoman:** British, dated; a woman employed as a cleaner in houses or offices.

#### It happened today

**From our files – 1886:** A meeting of the West Maitland Municipal Council voted that the government be asked to appoint a duly qualified expert to examine all cattle offered for sale, with power to destroy all diseased cattle or prevent them from being used for food.

#### Today in history

**1571:** A combined Austrian, Genoese and Venetian fleet decisively defeats the Turks off Lepanto, Greece. The bloodiest sea battle before the age of steam claims 33,000 lives.

**1806:** Carbon paper is patented in London by inventor Ralph Wedgwood.

**1949:** The Republic of East Germany is formed.

**1996:** Peter Doherty of Australia and Rolf Zinkernagel of Switzerland win the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine.

**1997:** After a generation of bloodletting, political leaders of Northern Ireland’s factions meet for the first full multi-party talks.

#### Born today

**Sir Walter Raleigh**, English explorer-poet-courtier (1552-1618); **Heinrich Himmler**, Nazi Gestapo chief (1900-1945);

**Desmond Tutu**, Anglican Archbishop in South Africa (1931-); **Thomas Keneally**,

novelist (1935-); **Clive James**,

author-TV personality (1939-); **John Mellencamp**, US

singer (1951-); **Vladimir Putin**,

Russian President (1952-); **Simon Cowell**, British record executive and TV judge (1959-); **Tim Minchin**, musician and comedian (1975-).



#### Odd spot

Memphis man Kenneth Bonds, 45, faces aggravated assault charges after being angered by two teenagers who would not pull up their sagging pants: he pulled a black semi-automatic pistol from his waistband and shot one in the rear.

#### Today's text

“I am the vine, and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.” **John 15:5**