

AUSTRALIA: A FULL HOUSE

■ Roger Short

Australia cannot cope with the population that recent projections imply it will have to carry in the twenty-first century without serious environmental damage. How then should Australia respond to the world population crisis?

Australia currently has one of the highest rates of population growth of any developed country. In 1992, the population grew at a rate of 1.06 per cent, 0.8 per cent due to natural increase and 0.26 per cent from immigration.¹

In the absence of any declared National Population Policy, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, which has responsibility for all population issues, determines the annual migrant intake on the basis of the nation's economic needs, demands from new migrants for admission of their next of kin, and humanitarian considerations with respect to refugees. It never gives a thought as to the long-term environmental consequences of our rapidly growing population. Indeed, the 1994 National Report on Population² boldly states that the Government has decided that 'formal population policy would not be appropriate for Australia, given its low levels of fertility' (emphasis mine). We are also reassured that 'research to date has not established a substantial link between population and the environment in Australia', although in the body of the report we are correctly informed that

...a high proportion of Australia's limited forest and woodland resources has been cleared or modified by agricultural and other purposes. Consequently, Australia has seen the highest rate of

mammal extinctions in the world and a large number of plants and animals unique to Australia are either threatened or endangered.

As far as the Government is concerned, such effects are obviously not 'substantial'! It is also admitted that

...a number of resource and environmental factors limit population size, in particular, levels of consumption of agricultural land, encroachment on coastal native bushland, availability of potable water and water pollution.

So we are already encountering limits to growth. Reared with the image of Australia as a Big Country, our economists and politicians have yet to realise the stark truth: this house is already full.

Australia's population will continue to grow for some time to come. The recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Report³ estimates that it will grow from 17.6 million in 1991 to 18.9 million by the end of this century, and 23.1 million by 2025, assuming fertility is maintained at current levels, and net migration stabilises at 70,000 per annum from the year 2000. If net migration should rise to 100,000 by the year 2000, then the population will reach 24.2 million by 2025, 26.7 million by 2041, and it will continue to rise thereafter. The World Bank⁴ estimates that Australia's population will eventually stabilise at 25 million some time in the future. Where will

these additional eight million people live? We will need two new Sydneys to accommodate them. The true fact of the matter is that almost all of this growth will take place in our existing cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney. This will add to their urban sprawl, taxing to the limit their water supplies, sewage, refuse disposal and transportation systems, and increasing CO₂ emissions and environmental pollution. The sooner we can call a halt to Australia's population growth, the better it will be for all concerned.

Of the two principle components of Australia's population growth, migration is in theory the easier to manipulate. Annual migrant intakes have varied from as high as 150,000 to as low as 70,000 during the last decade, giving us in peak years the highest per capita immigration rate in the world.⁵ This is no longer something to boast about. As Garrett Hardin has pointed out,⁶ we need to develop a '*Lifeboat Philosophy*' for each and every nation, and our economists and politicians must be taught the meaning of terms such as carrying capacity, resource limits, ecological systems and human values. There are limits to growth, and all developed countries are currently living beyond those limits.

If Australia could reduce its annual migrant intake to below 50,000, we could achieve a stable population of around 23 million by the year 2040, whereas if we allow it to revert to 150,000, the population will grow to 37 million. Surely everybody would agree that the lower figure is the more desirable?

Australia's Total Fertility Rate has been below the replacement level of 2.1 since 1976, and over the last decade it has stabilised at around 1.9.⁷ But because of the skewed age distribution of the population, with large

numbers of young people still entering the reproductive age group, the population will continue to grow by natural increase at the current rate of about 0.8 per cent per year for some time to come.

We could almost certainly bring about a further decline in the Total Fertility Rate, especially in the high fertility Aboriginal population, by improving educational opportunities for women, and by ensuring that all Australians had easy access to the best of modern contraceptives. We also need to see that contraceptive education becomes an essential part of every school curriculum. As it is, we have one of the poorest selections of modern contraceptives of any developed country, and we even lag far behind many developing countries like China, Indonesia and Thailand. We have yet to approve Norplant implants, the LevoNova intrauterine device, the RU486 abortion pill, or the female condom. As far as developed countries go, we also have one of the highest abortion rates, with 50 per cent of all teenage pregnancies ending in abortion.⁸ The Netherlands has the lowest incidence of abortion of any country in the world, and this is achieved in part by an excellent sex education program in all schools. In 1994, I found that 15 per cent of first year Monash medical students had not received any contraceptive education in school. This is not only a denial of individual human rights, but it borders on criminal negligence.

Our ambition should be to ensure that every birth in Australia is a wanted birth. Surely that is both a worthwhile and an attainable goal?

Australia must pay more attention to what is happening in the rest of the world. In October 1993, the world's Scientific Academies held a Population

Summit in New Delhi. The final statement, signed by 58 academies, including Australia's, called upon governments and international decision makers to take incisive action and adopt an integrated policy on population and sustainable development on a global scale. They concluded that 'to deal with the social, economic, and environmental problems, we must achieve zero population growth within the lifetime of our children'.⁹ The Australian Government should take heed of this wise advice.

Following hard on the heels of the New Delhi Summit, the Australian Academy of Science and the Academy of Social Sciences hosted a Ministerial Seminar on Population and Development in Canberra in November 1993.¹⁰ There was a heated debate between those who see human population growth as the transcending problem of our time and contraception as its logical solution, and those like Senator Harradine who see population control programs as wickedly coercive and the alleviation of poverty as the prime objective. The Australian Government therefore commissioned an independent inquiry into Population and Development. The report was released on 13 April 1994,¹¹ and not surprisingly, it concluded that

...slowing population growth from high current levels, especially in poor, agrarian societies facing pressure on land and resources, is advantageous to economic development, health, food availability, housing, poverty, the environment, and possibly education.

The Government has now removed the embargo on \$35 million of family planning aid imposed at the request of Senator Harradine.

In 1974 at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Bucharest, Dr

Karen Singh, the Indian Commissioner for Health and Family Planning, came up with the phrase 'development is the best contraceptive'. This was used as an excuse for inactivity by the affluent nations of the Western world, who waited and watched complacently for the carrot of development to pull the poor out of their quagmire, when all the while they were sinking deeper into it. The concept persisted for another ten years, when President Bush, at the UN Population Conference in Mexico City, cancelled US family planning aid to developing countries as a result of intense political lobbying by the American Right to Life movement.

Today, the prospects look more hopeful as the world prepares for the UN Population Conference in Cairo this September. Karen Singh has changed his mind and, along with the rest of the world (except The Pope and Senator Harradine), has rightly concluded that contraception is the best form of development. The Cairo conference will, for the first time, listen to the voices of women, and in particular to women from developing countries. The United States and Japan have already pledged \$4 billion for family planning aid by the year 2000. There already exists a vast, unmet demand for family planning in many developing countries, where women are being forced to have more children than they want because of the lack of contraceptive services. Our first priority must be to provide the funds so that this unmet demand can be satisfied.¹²

If we are to hold global rates of population growth in check, so that numbers increase from today's 5.6 billion to only 10 billion by the year 2050, we must increase contraceptive use from the present 390 million

couples to 500 million by the year 2000, 650 million by the year 2010, and 900 million by the year 2025. If we fail in this endeavour, if the Cairo conference fails to find sufficient donors to fund such a program (a mere one per cent of the annual global expenditure on defence), then the world's population is likely to reach 12.5 billion by 2050, 17.6 billion by 2100, and 20.8 billion by 2150, when it would still not have plateaued.¹³ Who would want to live in such a world? Indeed, would it be a world in which we could live?

And what of Australia? Our future will be increasingly determined by events taking place in South East Asia, and particularly in Indonesia, our nearest neighbour. Currently, Indonesia has a population of 181 million, which the World Bank estimates will increase to 206 million by 2000, 265 million by 2025 and will plateau at around 354 million towards the end of the coming century.¹⁴ At that population density, Indonesia's rain forests will have been destroyed in the search for more arable land, and the massive erosion of topsoil from the bare, denuded hillsides, coupled with coastal flooding from the rising sea levels produced by global warming, will result in millions of poor, starving, dispossessed peasants. Their only hope of survival will be to take to their boats and drift south to Australia's northern coastline, where for a time they could eke out a meagre existence. We would be faced by an overwhelming moral and military dilemma if we had to contend with a massive invasion by millions of starving boat people who come in peace — ecological refugees who have fouled their own nest.

We could perhaps help to avert such a disaster if we acted now, and

gave Indonesia the financial help it needs to extend its excellent BKKBN family planning program. Not only would Indonesia welcome our assistance, but it would be a far better investment for our long term security than the eight billion dollars we spend each year on defence. Australia's new four year \$130 million population initiative announced in September 1993 is a welcome step in the right direction, although we should seriously question the declared geographical focus of the Pacific, Papua New Guinea, China and Indo-China. This is not where the ecological refugees will come from. If Australia is to survive as a sovereign state in the coming century, our political masters must face the population problem in a more realistic way than they have done heretofore.

References

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- ⁶ G. Hardin, *Living Within Limits*, Oxford University Press, 1993
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¹² R.V. Short, *Contraceptive strategies for the future*, Proc. Roy. Soc. Lond. (in press, 1994)

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *World Bank Development Report 1993 Investing in Health*, op. cit.

THE POLITICISATION OF ENGLISH: THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE TESTING

■ Lesleyanne Hawthorne

English language competence is central to the employment prospects of migrant professionals. However, until recently, the testing procedures used by professional associations and the Australian Government have been poorly designed and poorly implemented.

The past ten years have seen the evolution of English-language testing as a significant instrument of Australian immigration policy — an issue to date attracting minimal public attention. Two case studies serve to illustrate this developing trend:

- * The 1992 introduction of mandatory English language testing at overseas posts in a range of skilled occupations — with passes henceforth compulsory for principal applicants in prominent occupations, to be known as 'Occupations Requiring English' (ORE) (teachers, lecturers, health professionals, engineers, pilots, air traffic controllers, electrical tradespeople and judges).¹ Assessment of English from this time became a direct and malleable instrument for the restriction of skilled migrant intakes.
- * The announcement of mandatory English-language testing as a means of screening and selecting the People's Republic of China (PRC) nationals who had reached Australia post-Tiananmen Square (1989), applying for permanent residence as asylum seekers prior to the 1992 cut-off date. ('Principal applicants will be required to

demonstrate that they have the ability to communicate in English in a mix of work and social situations...'²) Selection by vocational English provided one acceptable means of limiting the size and settlement needs of the PRC 'compassionate' intake.

This article focuses on the evolution of English-language testing in relation to skilled migration categories. It argues that the introduction of mandatory language testing as a screening device represents a significant and timely reform — one introduced at the end of a decade characterised by two recessions, and the emergence of increasing evidence concerning the comparative labour market disadvantage of skilled non-English speaking background (NESB) migrants (see Footnote 3).

This mandatory language testing represents a substantial break with past Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIEA) practice, in a number of significant ways. Firstly, visas are now denied principal ORE applicants who fail to demonstrate vocational English as a Second Language (ESL) competence — regardless of the number of points attained across other selection criteria, or Concessional