



Re: Refreshing Tasmania's Population Strategy

The North East Bioregional Network (NEBN) is a community based nature conservation organisation concerned with the protection, maintenance and restoration of the natural environment in the north east and east coast of Tasmania.

To this end NEBN undertakes a range of activities including environmental education, ecological restoration, land use planning and advocacy.

Impacts of Population Growth

NEBN believes that population growth is linked directly and indirectly to a range of adverse environmental and other impacts including but not limited to:

- *increased land use conflict
- . *increased traffic congestion
- * ,urban sprawl
- *urban intensification....including loss of backyards, open space, tree canopy, increased flooding risk, stormwater pollution
- * loss of bushland and biodiversity
- * loss of agricultural land
- *stress on public services including the health system and education system
- * the enormous cost of infrastructure to support population growth ie diseconomies of scale
- * the inability of government to be able to keep up with infrastructure needs
- * loss of residential amenity and quality of life
- * increased cost of housing and lack of housing availability either for purchase or rentals and flow on impacts of housing crisis leading to pressure for more urban development

- * increased inequality
- * increased use of natural resources
- * increased use and pressure on recreational and protected areas
- * increased corruption related to property development
- * fire management issues related to defending urban fringes sprawl
- * increased pressure on water supplies
- * waste management issues.

There doesn't appear to be any integrated or strategic planning to address this and other impacts associated with population growth with the following statement on page 8 suggesting siloed thinking

“ It is recognised that there are a range of Tasmanian Government strategies, and commitments that focus on critical areas related to population growth, for instance housing and health. The Population Strategy will avoid duplicating these efforts and rather look to work across government to integrate approaches to better prepare for emerging population trends and issues.”

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Tasmania is not coping with the current level of population growth in the State.

As such the population strategy focus on rapid population growth is fundamentally flawed and almost certainly will lead to exacerbating many of the impacts mentioned above.

The 2021 National State of the Environment Report states, ‘Human activity and population growth are major drivers of many pressures on biodiversity. Impacts are associated with urban expansion, tourism, industrial expansion, pollution, fishing, hunting and development of infrastructure. The impacts from population growth are extensive and increasing in many areas.’

Growth as a panacea

In Kerryn Higgs book entitled *Collision Course* the market fundamentalist/neoliberal perspective that all growth is good is unmasked as an empty promise. The State Governments Population Policy represents a key plank of an overall strategic direction which prioritises continuous and endless economic growth and development above all else regardless of the cost and even when it is not physically possible.

FROM COLLISION COURSE by Kerryn Higgs

“The story behind the reckless promotion of economic growth despite its disastrous consequences for life on the planet.

The notion of ever-expanding economic growth has been promoted so relentlessly that “growth” is now entrenched as the natural objective of collective human effort. The public has been convinced that growth is the natural solution to virtually all social problems—poverty, debt, unemployment, and even the environmental degradation caused by the determined pursuit of growth. Meanwhile, warnings by scientists / that we live on a finite planet that cannot sustain infinite economic expansion are ignored or even scorned. In *Collision Course*, Kerryn Higgs examines how society's commitment to growth has marginalized scientific findings on the limits of growth, casting them as bogus predictions of imminent doom.

Higgs tells how in 1972, *The Limits to Growth*—written by MIT researchers Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William Behrens III—found that unimpeded economic growth was likely to collide with the realities of a finite planet within a century. Although the book's arguments received positive responses initially, before long the dominant narrative of growth as panacea took over. Higgs explores the resistance to ideas about limits, tracing the propagandizing of “free enterprise,” the elevation of growth as the central objective of policy makers, the celebration of “the magic of the market,” and the ever-widening influence of corporate-funded think tanks—a parallel academic universe dedicated to the

dissemination of neoliberal principles and to the denial of health and environmental dangers from the effects of tobacco to global warming. More than forty years after *The Limits to Growth*, the idea that growth is essential continues to hold sway, despite the mounting evidence of its costs—climate destabilization, pollution, intensification of gross global inequalities, and depletion of the resources on which the modern economic edifice depends.”

In the Population Strategy there is an attempt to associate economic growth and development/population growth with language such as positive, well-being, sustainable, improving, better planning, gender equity, inclusive, diversity, health, lifestyle, liveability, belonging, happiness, safe, inclusive, raise a family, cultural diversity

This is unfortunately misleading. Attempts to downplay the negative impacts and overstate the benefits of population growth are repeated throughout the document as on page 4 Table where the list of positives related to population growth vastly outnumber the small list of negatives which are referred to euphemistically as “challenges”. **Recognition of the impacts of population growth on nature conservation/biodiversity are conspicuously absent despite it being recognised that the environment is a key attraction for those living in and visiting Tasmania.**

Population Strategy is a property development policy

The State Government in conjunction with the property development industry (Property Council (PC), Master Builders Association(MBA), Housing Industry Australia(HIA) etc) has since its election in 2014 sought to weaken the planning system in Tasmania for the benefit of property development under the guise of “planning reform”. The three key lobbyists in the push for planning reform in Tasmania which started around 2010 were Mary Massina (PC), Stuart Clues(HIA) and Michael Kerschbaum (MBA). All three were

subsequently employed by the Liberal Government after their election in 2014.

In recent years the Govt has also introduced a range of other subsidies and laws to increase property development in Tasmania including Housing Land Supply Orders and the current Local Govt Review which proposes taking planning away from Local Councils. In addition Homes Tasmania has been established to facilitate a Housing Strategy which no doubt will recommend further “reforms” to fast track property development (perhaps through Regional Land Use Strategies) such as large scale rezonings and mandated development targets for local councils.

The relevance of the above to the Population Policy is that the Governments support for continual population growth is in sync with what the property development industry wants which is creating ongoing demand for more property development and associated infrastructure in Tasmania. As such the Govt population strategy is primarily a property development strategy.

No social licence

The Governments strategy supports rapid population growth for Tasmania however there is no social licence or mandate for this.

Given the massive planning, environmental and socioeconomic implications population growth has for Tasmania a referendum or plebiscite must be held to ascertain what the Tasmanian communities view on this issue is.

A recent Mercury Poll indicated that the majority of respondents did not support increasing Tasmania’s population while a just released survey from The Australian Population Research Institute also reaffirmed that the majority of Australians don’t support population growth.

As such the Government's population strategy doesn't reflect the views of the majority of the community.

Ageing

As stated on Page 5 of the Strategy population growth is not a particularly effective strategy for addressing ageing.

“Despite the state's positive progress in population growth, particularly in the 20-34 year old age group since 2016, the Tasmanian population continues to be the oldest in the country.”

In 2019 Cameron Murray and Leith Van Onselen successfully debunked the ageing myth and made the following comments and suggestions:

- Population ageing is a successful result of efforts to improve longevity.
- Countries with older populations maintain high workforce participation, are more productive, and grow faster economically.
- Ageing does not lower workforce participation in general. Since 2012 there have been more full-time workers aged over 65 than under 20.
- Low net immigration of between 50-80,000 permanent migrants per year can alter the age structure over the long-term by stabilising the population.
- Low net immigration increases GDP per capita and wage growth.
- High net immigration above this 50-80,000 amount has almost no additional effect on changing the age structure and simply increases the total population.
- Most of the increase in permanent migration since the early 2000s

has been through the skilled migration program.

- This program primarily benefits the migrants themselves and increases wage competition for other workers.
- A focus on skilled immigration fosters a “brain drain” from developing countries, reducing human welfare.
- There is a real economic cost to high population growth due to the diseconomies of scale inherent in rapid infrastructure expansion.
- There is a real cost from environmental degradation due to development to accommodate much higher populations.
- The high costs of population growth are often ignored, as immigration policy is a federal matter, while infrastructure provision is predominantly a state and council matter.
- Population growth in general dilutes ownership of our environmental endowments, mineral wealth, fisheries, wildlife, and national parks.
- The political capital and resource devoted to managing high growth have an opportunity cost in terms of solving other social problems such as homelessness, indigenous disadvantage, mental health, and other social services.

Policy recommendations

- **Reframe ageing** as the economic success story that it is.
- Reframe immigration as an environmental and ethical choice, not an economic necessity.
- Lower overall net immigration to the 50-80,000 range by mainly targeting skilled visas. This can largely be achieved by increasing the minimum salary for skilled migrants to 150% of the average full-time salary, or \$129,900. This desirable net immigration range can be achieved while having a slightly higher permanent intake of around 80-90,000 per year, as permanent departures will reduce the net effect while still maintaining the optimal target range.
- Adopt systems for infrastructure planning and provision that clarify the expected cost of new public and essential services, and ensure upgrades keep pace with city growth for the benefit of existing and new residents

The Productivity Commission has substantially debunked the arguments that Australia needs migration to counter the ageing population. It [noted in its 2016 report](#) that migration “does not offer a long term panacea – immigrants age too”.

Skills shortage and Baby Bonuses

Another excuse used to justify population growth is “skills shortages”. In short we support the need for some targeted importation of people to meet specific needs but the priority needs to be on training Australians/Tasmanians to fill those needs rather than continual reliance on immigration.

[The skills crisis, university culpability and the overseas student industry](#)

The Strategy states “Increasing the number of births is important for sustaining a steady population growth”. This assumes that population growth is something that the community supports which clearly is not reflected in polling on this issue. While it is important to support families and provide adequate child care services the Govt should have policies that encourage sound family planning policies rather than aiming to incentivise population growth

Population projections underestimated

On page 6 our view is that population projections are underestimated. Given the recent level of population growth in Tasmania and the Federal Govt unprecedented high immigration policies we believe that population growth in the next few decades may be a lot higher than is represented in the Strategy and this has significant planning and environmental consequences.

Playing the Race Card

On page 11 and 12 of the Strategy there is a subtle inference made that opposition to population growth especially immigration is race based. While there may be elements in Tasmania who are racist opposition to population growth is very much based on community concerns about increases in the number of people when there is clearly already significant strains on the environment, infrastructure and services rather than objections based on race.

Precautionary Principle

NEBN suggests that the Govt should adopt a precautionary approach to population growth and other forms of economic growth that risk degrading and destroying many of the values Tasmanians hold dear.

The increasingly evident repercussions of Climate Change makes such an approach even more important. While Tasmania's clean energy is a great asset it should not be assumed that clean energy is the beginning and end of "sustainability". Sustainability means leaving the world in better condition that you found it generation after generation and we are clearly not doing that. Using renewable energy to continue with business as usual destruction of the environment is not sustainable nor is overpopulating Tasmania. There must be limits to growth.

Conclusion

NEBN supports stabilising Tasmania's population at current or close to existing levels. Our view is that ongoing population growth will erode many of the environmental and lifestyle values which make Tasmania an attractive place to live in and visit.

A referendum /plebiscite is urgently required to properly gauge the Tasmanian communities view on population growth

In addition the Government should advocate for the Federal Government to initiate a sustainable population policy whereby immigration levels are reduced to 70-80,000 per annum which would then mean Australia's population would stabilise in the future rather than continue to grow.

The State Governments Population Strategy is a lightweight population advocacy document. Our view is the Government is primarily interested in exploiting Tasmania's lifestyle and environment as a marketing tool for the purposes of facilitating mass tourism and property development which is part of a larger agenda of mega industrialisation of Tasmania (ie Marinus, Aquaculture, Rural Water Use Strategy etc)

We reject the Governments Population aspirations and suggest instead the focus be on **being Better not Bigger.**

Small is beautiful.

Todd Dudley

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